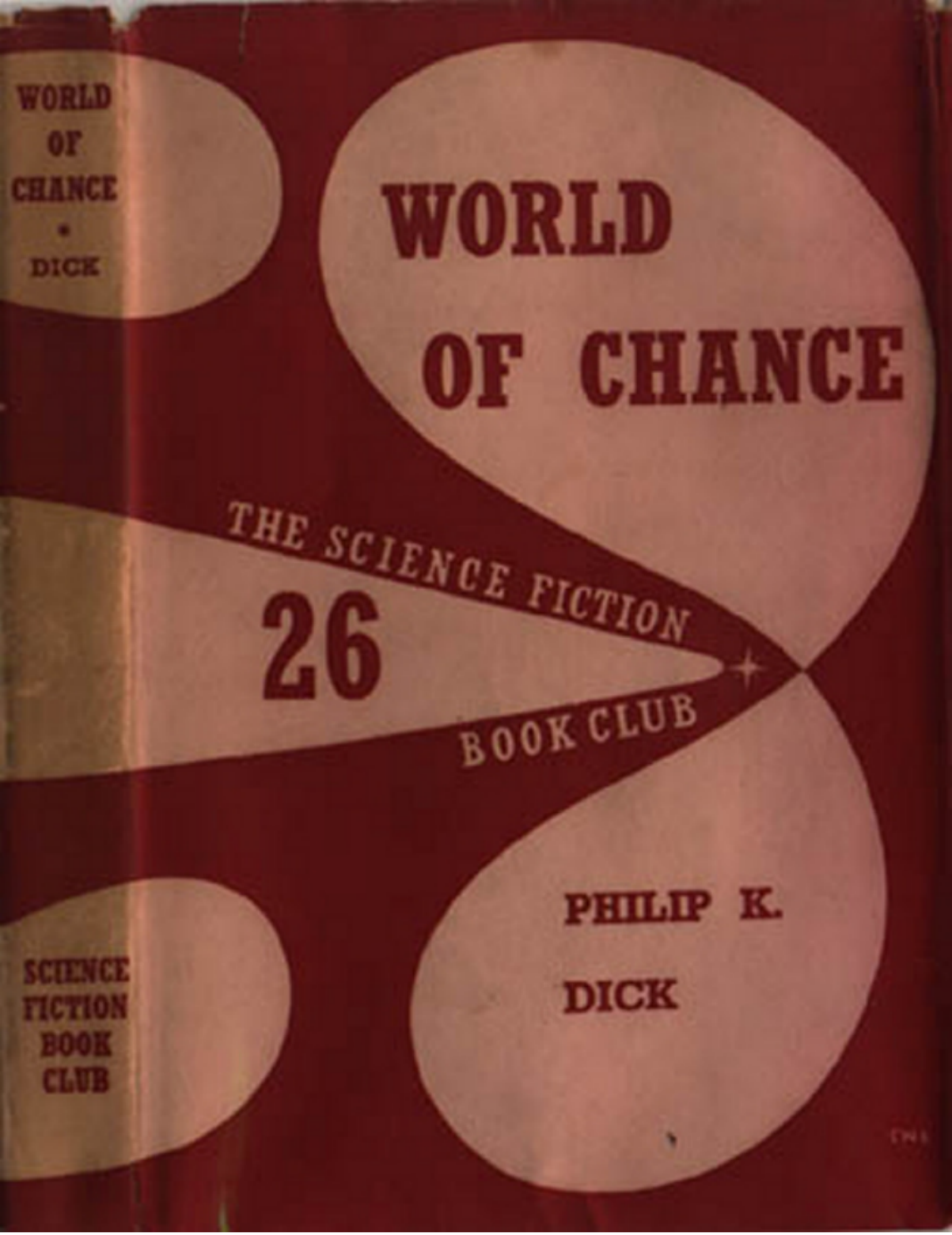
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Philip K. Dick
World of Chance

Chapter I

There had been harbingers.

Early in May of 2203 newsmachines were excited by a flight of white crows over Sweden. A series of unexplained fires demolished half the Oiseau-Lyre Hill, an industrial pivot of the system. Small stones fell near work-camp installations on Mars. At Batavia, the Directorate of the nine-planet Federation, a two-headed calf was born, a sign that something of incredible magnitude was brewing.

Everybody speculated on what the forces of Nature intended. Everybody guessed, consulted, and argued about the bottle—the socialized instrument of chance. Directorate fortune-tellers were booked up weeks in advance.

But one man's harbinger is another man's event. The first reaction from Oiseau-Lyre to its limited catastrophe was to create total catastrophe for half its employees. Fealty oaths were dissolved, and a variety of research technicians were tossed out. Adrift, they became a further symptom of the approaching moment-of-importance for the system. Most of these technicians floundered and were lost among the masses. But not all.

Ted Benteley yanked his dismissal notice from the board and as he walked to his office he tore the notice to bits. His reaction differed from that of those around him; he was glad to have his oath severed. For thirteen years he had been trying to break his fealty oath with Oiseau-Lyre.

He locked his office door, snapped off his Inter-Plan Visual Industries Corp. screen, and did some thinking. It took only an hour to develop his plan of action.

At noon Oiseau-Lyre's outworker department returned his power card. His one chance out of six billion in the great lottery. His fragile possibility of being twitched by the random motion of the bottle to the Number One class position. Politically speaking, he was back thirty-three years; the power-card was coded at the moment of birth.

At two-thirty he dissolved his remaining fealty connections at Oiseau-Lyre; they were mostly with himself as protector and somebody else as serf. By four o'clock he had liquidated his assets and had bought a first-class transport ticket. Before nightfall he was on his way out of Europe, heading for the Indonesian Empire.

In Batavia he rented a room and unpacked his case; the rest of his possessions were still in France. Curiously, his room overlooked the main Directorate building. Like tropical flies people crept in and out of its many doors. All roads, and all space-lanes, led to Batavia.

His funds didn't amount to much; he could stall only so long.

From the Public Information Library he picked up armloads of tape and a basic scanner. As the days passed he built up information relating to all aspects of biochemistry, the subject on which his original classification had been won. As he scanned and crammed he kept one thought in mind: applications for positional-fealty oaths were processed only once; if he failed in the first try he was finished.

That first try was going to be successful. He was free of the Hill system, and he wasn't going back.

During the next five days he smoked endless cigarettes, paced his room, and finally got out the yellow section of the ipvic directory to look up the local girl agencies. His favourite agency had a nearby office; within an hour most of his psychological problems were solved. With the aid of the blonde sent by the agency and the cocktail bar down the street, he was able to last another twenty-four hours. But that was as far as he could string it out; the time to act had come.

A cold chill lay over him as he got out of bed. With Quizmaster Verrick employment oaths were apparently handed out haphazardly. It was impossible to deduce what factor, if any, determined successful application.

He shaved, dressed, paid Lori her wages, and sent her back to the agency.

Loneliness hit him hard. And fear. He surrendered his room, stored his suit-case, and bought himself a second good luck charm. In a public washroom he buttoned the charm inside his shirt and dropped a coin in the phenol-barb dispenser. The sedative calmed him; he emerged and flagged down a robot taxi.

"Main Directorate building," he told the driver, "and take your time."

"All right, sir or madam," the MacMillan robot answered; MacMillans weren't capable of fine discriminations.

Spring air billowed into the cab as it zipped above the rooftops. Benteley wasn't interested; his eyes were fixed on the growing syndrome of buildings ahead. His written papers had been shot in the night before. He had waited about the right time; they should be appearing on the desk of the first checker in the chain of Directorate officials.

"Here we are, sir or madam." The robot taxi settled down and grappled itself to a halt. Benteley stepped from the open door.

On a main pedestrian artery he paused to light a cigarette. His hands weren't shaking, not really. He shoved his case under his arm as he reached the processing lounge. Perhaps by this time next month he would be under fealty to the Directorate... he touched one of the charms inside his shirt.

"Ted," a voice came, small and urgent. "Wait!"

He halted as Lori threaded her way through the crowd and came to him.

"I have something for you," she said breathlessly. "I knew I'd catch you here."

"What is it?" Benteley demanded. He knew that the Directorate's special Corps was close by; he didn't want his intimate thoughts known by eighty bored telepaths.

Lori reached round his neck and clicked something in place. It was another good luck charm.

Benteley examined the charm. "You think it'll do me any good?" he asked.

"I hope so." She touched his arm briefly. "Thanks for being so nice. You hustled me off before I could tell you." She lingered plaintively. "If you get taken on you'll probably stay here in Batavia."

Irritably, Benteley answered: "You're being observed. Verrick has observers planted all over the place."

"I don't mind," Lori said wistfully. "Call girls have nothing to conceal."

"I don't like it." Benteley shrugged. "But if I'm going to hook on here I'll have to get used to being watched."

He moved towards the central desk, his identifying cards ready. A few moments later the MacMillan official accepted them.

"All right, Ted Benteley. You may go in."

Benteley stubbed out his cigarette and turned towards the inner offices.

"I'll look you up," he murmured to Lori as he stepped through the door.

He was inside: it had begun.

A small middle-aged man with steel-rimmed glasses and a tiny waxed moustache was standing by the door watching him intently.

"You're Benteley?"

"That's right," Benteley answered. "I'm here to see Quizmaster Verrick."

"Why?"

"I'm looking for a class 8-8 position."

A girl pushed abruptly into the office. Ignoring Benteley, she said rapidly:

"Well, it's over." She touched her temple. "See? Now are you satisfied?"

"Don't blame me," the small man said. "It's the law."

"The law!" The girl shrugged her crimson hair out of her eyes. She grabbed a packet of cigarettes from the desk and lit up with shaky fingers. "Let's get out, Peter. There's nothing of importance left."

"You know I'm staying," the small man said.

The girl half-turned as she noticed Benteley for the first time. Her green eyes flickered with interest.

"Who are you?"

"Maybe you'd better come back some other time," the small man said to Benteley. "This isn't exactly the——"

"I didn't come this far to get chucked out," Benteley said hoarsely. "Where's Verrick?"

The girl eyed him curiously. "You want to see Reese? What are you selling?"

"I'm a biochemist," Benteley answered, "looking for a class 8-8 position."

Amusement twisted the girl's lips. "Is that so? Interesting... ." She shrugged her bare shoulders. "Swear him, Peter."

The small man hesitated.

"I'm Peter Wakeman," he said to Benteley. "This girl is Eleanor Stevens, Verrick's private secretary."

It wasn't exactly what Benteley had expected. There was a silence as the three of them appraised one another.

"The MacMillan passed him in," Wakeman said presently. "There's an open call for 8-8 people. But I think Verrick has no need for more biochemists."

"What do you know about it?" Eleanor Stevens demanded. "You're not running personnel."

"I'm using common sense." Very deliberately Wakeman moved between the girl and Benteley. "I'm sorry," he said to the man. "You're wasting your time here. Go to the Hill offices—they're always buying and selling biochemists."

"I know," Benteley said. "I've worked for the Hill system since I was sixteen."

"Then what do you want here?" Eleanor asked.

"Oiseau-Lyre dropped me."

"Go over to Soong."

"I'm not working for any more Hills!" Benteley's voice lifted harshly. "I'm through with the Hills."

"Why?" Wakeman asked.

Benteley grunted.

"The Hills are corrupt. The whole system's decaying. It's up for sale to the highest bidder... and bidding's going on."

Wakeman pondered. "I don't see what that matters to you. You have your work; that's what you're supposed to be thinking about."

"For my time, skill and loyalty I get money," Benteley agreed. "I have a lab and equipment that cost more to build than I'll earn in a lifetime. But what is the result of my work? Where does it go?" Benteley struggled to continue. "I stood the smell of Oiseau-Lyre as

long as possible. The Hills are supposed to be separate, independent economic units; actually, they're sliding together into a homogeneous mass. It isn't merely a question of mis-shipments and expense padding and doctored tax returns. You know the Hill slogan: service is good and better service is best. That's a laugh! You think the Hills care about serving anybody? Instead of existing for the public good they're parasites on the public."

"I never imagined the Hills were philanthropic organizations," Wakeman said.

Benteley moved away from them. Why did he get upset about the Hills? Nobody had complained yet. *But he was complaining.* Maybe it was lack of realism on his part, an anachronistic survival the child-guidance clinic hadn't been able to shake out of him. Whatever it was, he had taken as much as he could stand.

"How do you know the Directorate is any better?" Wakeman asked. "You have a lot of illusions about it, I think."

"Let him swear," Eleanor said indifferently.

Wakeman shook his head. "I won't swear him."

"I will, then," the girl answered.

From the desk drawer Wakeman got a flask and poured himself a drink. "Anybody care to join me?"

Benteley turned irritably. "Is this the way the Directorate is run?"

Wakeman smiled. "Your illusions are being shattered. Stay where you are, Benteley; you don't know when you're well off."

Eleanor slid from the desk and hurried out of the room. She returned in a moment with the customary symbol-representation of the Quizmaster. "Come over here, Benteley. I'll accept your oath." She placed the small plastic flesh-coloured bust of Reese Verrick in the centre of the desk and turned briskly to Benteley. As Benteley moved towards the desk she reached up and touched the cloth bag hanging from a string round his neck, the charm Lori had put there. "What kind of charm is that?" she asked.

Benteley showed her the bit of magnetized steel and white powder.

"Virgin's milk," he explained curtly.

"That's all you carry?" Eleanor indicated the array of charms dangling on her chest. "I don't understand how people manage with only one charm." Her green eyes danced. "Maybe you don't! Maybe that's why you have bad luck."

"I have a high positive scale," Benteley replied. "And I have two other charms. Somebody gave me this."

She leaned close and examined it intently. "It's the kind of charm a woman would buy. Expensive, but flashy."

"Is it true," Benteley asked her, "that Verrick doesn't carry any

charms?"

"That's right," Wakeman spoke up. "He doesn't need them. When the bottle twitched him to One he was already class six-three. Talk about luck! He's risen all the way to the top exactly as you see on the children's edutapes. Luck leaks out of his pores."

"I've seen people touch him hoping to get some of it," Eleanor said. "I don't blame them. I've touched him myself, many times."

"What good has it done you?" Wakeman asked quietly; he indicated the girl's discoloured temples.

"I wasn't born at the same time and place as Reese," Eleanor answered shortly.

"I don't hold with astro-cosmology," Wakeman said. "Luck comes in streaks." Speaking slowly and intently to Benteley, he continued: "Verrick may have it now, but that doesn't mean he'll always have it." He gestured vaguely towards the floor above, "They like to see some kind of balance." He added hastily: "I'm not a Christian or anything like that, you understand. I know it's all chance. Everybody gets his chance. And the high and the mighty always fall."

Eleanor shot Wakeman a warning look. "Be careful!"

Without taking his eyes from Benteley, Wakeman said slowly:

"You're out of fealty; take advantage of that. Don't swear yourself on to Verrick. You'll be stuck to him, as one of his permanent serfs."

Benteley was chilled. "You mean I'm supposed to take an oath directly to Verrick? Not a positional oath to the Quizmaster?"

"That's right," Eleanor said.

"Why?"

"Ican't give you information. Later on there'll be an assignment for you in terms of your class requirements; that's guaranteed."

Benteley gripped his case and moved away. His expectations had fallen apart. "I'm in?" he demanded, half-angrily. "I'm acceptable?"

"Verrick wants all eight-eight's he can get. You can't miss."

"Wait," Bentley said, confused and uncertain. "Give me time to decide." Then he withdrew.

Eleanor wandered about the room. "Any more news of that fellow?" she asked Wakeman.

"Only the initial closed-circuit warning to me," Wakeman said. "His name is Leon Cartwright. He's a member of some kind of cult. I'm curious to see what he's like."

"I'm not." Eleanor halted at the window and gazed down at the streets below. "Maybe I made a mistake. But it's over; there's nothing I can do."

"When you're older you'll realize how much of a mistake," Wakeman agreed.

Fear came to the girl's face. "I'll never leave Verrick. He'll take

care of me; he always has."

"The Corps will protect you."

"I don't want anything to do with the Corps." Her lips drew back against her even, white teeth. "My *family*. My willing Uncle Peter—up for sale, like his Hills." She indicated Benteley. "And he thinks he won't find it here."

"It's not a question of sale," Wakeman said. "It's a principle. The Corps is above any man."

"The Corps is a fixture, like this desk. You buy all the furniture, the lights, the ipvics, the Corps." Disgust glowed in her eyes. "A Prestonite, is that it?"

"That's it."

"No wonder you're anxious to see him. In a morbid way I suppose I'm curious, too."

At the desk, Benteley roused himself from his thoughts. "All right," he said aloud. "I'm ready."

"Fine!" Eleanor slipped behind the desk, one hand raised, the other on the bust. "You know the oath?"

Benteley knew the fealty oath by heart, but gnawing doubt slowed him almost to a halt. Wakeman stood examining his nails, looking disapproving and bored. Eleanor Stevens watched avidly, her face intense with emotions that altered each moment. With a growing conviction that things were not right, Benteley began reciting his fealty oath to the small plastic bust.

The doors of the office slid back and a group of men entered noisily. One towered over the rest; a huge man, lumbering and broad-shouldered, with a grey, weathered face and thick iron-streaked hair. Reese Verrick, surrounded by those of his staff in personal fealty to him, halted as he saw the procedure taking place at the desk.

Wakeman glanced up and caught Verrick's eye. He smiled faintly but said nothing. Eleanor Stevens had become as rigid as stone. As soon as Benteley had finished she snapped into life. She carefully hurried the plastic bust out of the office and then returned, hand held out.

"I want your power-card, Mr. Benteley. We have to have it."

"Who's this fellow?" Verrick mumbled, with a wave towards Benteley.

"An eight-eight." Eleanor nervously grabbed up her things from the desk; her good luck charms dangled and vibrated excitedly. "I'll get my coat."

"Eight-eight? Biochemist?" Verrick eyed Benteley with interest. "Is he any good?"

"He's all right," Wakeman said. "What I found out seemed to be top-notch."

Eleanor slammed the cupboard door, then threw her coat over her shoulders. "He just came in, from Oiseau-Lyre." She breathlessly joined the group clustered round Verrick. "He doesn't know, yet."

Verrick's heavy face was wrinkled with fatigue and worry, but a faint spark of amusement lit up his deep-set eyes.

"The last crumbs, for a while. The rest goes to Cartwright, the Prestonite." He addressed Benteley. "What's your name?"

They shook hands as Benteley replied. Verrick's massive hand crunched his bones has Benteley feebly asked: "Where are we going? I thought——"

"Chemie Hill." Verrick and his group moved towards the exit—all but Wakeman, who remained behind to await the new Quizmaster. To Eleanor Stevens, Verrick explained briefly: "We'll operate from there. The lock I put on Chemie last year was to me personally. I can still claim loyalty there, in spite of this."

"In spite of what?" Benteley demanded, suddenly horrified. The outside doors were open; for the first time the cries of the newsmachines came loudly to his ears. As the party moved down the ramp towards the waiting intercon transports Benteley demanded hoarsely: *"What's happened?"*

"Come on," Verrick grunted. "You'll know all about it before long."

Benteley slowly followed the party. He knew, now. It was being shrilled on all sides of him, screamed out by the mechanical voices of public newsmachines.

"Verrick quacked!" the machines cried. "Prestonite bottled to One! A twitch of the bottle this morning at nine-thirty Batavia time! Verrrrrick quaaaaaacked!"

The power switch had come, the event the harbingers had expected. Verrick had been switched from the number One position; he was no longer Quizmaster. He had plunged to the bottom, out of the Directorate completely.

And Benteley had sworn an oath to him.

It was too late to turn back. He was on his way to the A.G. Chemie Hill. All of them were caught up together in the rush of events that was shivering through the nine-planet system like a winter storm.

Chapter II

Early in the morning Leon Cartwright drove carefully along the narrow, twisting streets in his ancient '82 Chevrolet. As usual, he wore an outmoded but immaculate suit and a shapeless hat was crushed against his head. Everything about him breathed obsolescence and age; he was perhaps sixty, a lean, sinewy man, tall and straight but small-boned, with mild blue eyes and liver-spotted wrists. His arms were thin but strong and wiry. He had an almost gentle expression on his gaunt face.

In the back seat lay heaps of mailing-tapes ready to be sent out. The floor sagged under heavy bundles of metal-foil to be imprinted and franked. An old raincoat was in the corner, together with a lunchbox and a number of discarded overshoes.

The buildings on both sides of Cartwright were old and faded, peeling things with dusty windows and drab neon signs. Relics of the last century, like himself and his car. Drab men in faded clothing, eyes blank and unfriendly, lounged in doorways. Dumpy middle-aged women in shapeless coats dragged rickety shopping carts into dark stores, to pick fretfully over the stale food to be lugged back to their restless families.

Mankind's lot, Cartwright ruminated, hadn't changed much, of late. The Classification system, the elaborate Quizzes, hadn't done many people any good.

In the early twentieth century the problem of production had been solved; after that, it was the problem of consumption that plagued society. In the nineteen fifties and sixties consumer commodities and farm products began to pile up in towering mountains all over the Western World. As much as possible was given away—but that threatened to subvert the open market. By 1980 the *pro tem* solution was to heap up the products and burn them—billions of dollars' worth, week after week.

Each Saturday townspeople had collected in sullen, resentful crowds to watch the troops squirt petrol on the cars and clothes and oranges and coffee and cigarettes that nobody could buy, igniting them in a blinding bonfire. In each town there was a burning-place, fenced off, where the fine things that could not be purchased were systematically destroyed.

The Quizzes had helped, a trifle. If people couldn't afford to buy the expensive manufactured goods, they could still hope to win them. The economy was propped up for decades by elaborate give-away devices that dispensed tons of glittering merchandise. But for every man who won a car and a refrigerator and a television set there were

millions who didn't. Gradually, over the years, prizes in the Quizzes grew from material commodities to more realistic items: power and prestige. And at the top, the final exalted post: the dispenser of power, the Quizmaster.

The disintegration of the social and economic system had been gradual. It went so deep that people lost faith in natural law itself. Nothing seemed stable or fixed; the universe was a sliding flux. Nobody knew what came next. Nobody could count on anything. Statistical prediction became popular; the very concept of cause and effect died out. People lost faith in the belief that they could control their environment.

The theory of Minimax—the M-game—was a kind of stoic withdrawal, a non-participation in the aimless swirl in which people struggled. The M-game player never really committed himself; he risked nothing, gained nothing... and wasn't overwhelmed. He sought to hoard his pot and strove to outlast the other players. The M-game player sat waiting for the game to end; that was the best that could be hoped for.

Minimax, the method of surviving the great game of life, was invented by two twentieth-century mathematicians: von Neumann and Morgenstern. It had been used in the Second World War, in the Korean War, and in the Final War. Military strategists and then financiers had played with the theory. In the middle of the century von Neumann was appointed to the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, recognition of the burgeoning significance of his theory. And in two centuries and a half it became the basis of government.

That was why Leon Cartwright, electronics repairman and human being with a conscience, had become a Prestonite. Cartwright pulled his ancient car to the kerb. Ahead of him the Society building gleamed white in the May sun, a narrow three-storey structure of wood, its single sign jutting up above the laundry next door.

PRESTON SOCIETY

Main offices at rear

This was the back entrance, the loading platform. Cartwright opened the back of the car and began dragging out cartons of mailing literature.

He trundled a heavy wood carton down the narrow walk and into the gloomy storage room of the building. A single atronic bulb was fastened to the ceiling; it glowed feebly in the dank silence. Supplies were stacked on all sides, towering columns of crates and wire-bound boxes. He found an empty spot and set down his load.

He passed through the hall and into the cramped front office. Nobody was there; the office and its barren reception room were empty. The front door of the building was standing wide open, as

usual. Cartwright picked up a heap of letters, sat down on the sagging couch and spread them out on the table, after pushing aside a dog-eared copy of John Preston's third book, *Flame Disc*.

He opened a letter and removed a five-dollar bill and a long note in a shaky handwriting. There were a few more microscopic contributions. Adding them up, he found the Society had received thirty dollars. Bills added up to over five hundred dollars. He folded the money and crossed to the counter to snap on the ancient ipvic.

"What's the exact time?" he asked the mechanical clerk.

"Nine fifty-two, sir or madam."

Cartwright set his pocket watch and wandered about the office. He stood for a moment in the narrow doorway; the sunlight was cold and pleasant, and it made him sleepy. He yawned and relaxed against the door jamb.

"They're getting restless," Rita O'Neill said behind him. "Stop putting it off."

"I'm waiting because I have to," he answered, without turning round.

"You're not afraid of them, are you?"

"I'm afraid, but not of them." Cartwright turned back into the office. He moved down the narrow hall and Rita O'Neill hurried after him, into the gloomy inner passage that ran parallel to the ordinary corridor.

"Any more funds come in today?" she asked.

"Thirty dollars."

"Don't turn up your nose at that. It'll buy us another crate of protine."

Cartwright passed on to Doctor Flood, sitting on a stool in the shadows beyond the turn of the corridor. The air was musty and dark; cobwebs and rubbish littered the passage. Somewhere in the rat-scratched depths creaky ventilation equipment wheezed laboriously. Beyond the sealed doorway at the end of the corridor came a crack of light and the low murmur of voices.

"You certainly took your time getting here," Doctor Flood complained. A sullen mound of a man, thick-fingered, with watery red eyes, he grinned a sour gold-toothed leer at Cartwright. "What were you doing—waiting for more members?" He chuckled wetly. "There won't be any because this is all there is. This is the total organization."

Cartwright and Rita O'Neill pushed open the metal door and entered the meeting chamber.

The people waiting glanced up as the door opened. Talk ceased abruptly and all eyes were on Cartwright. An eager hope mixed with fright shuddered through the room; relieved, a few people edged towards him. The murmur boiled up again and became a babble; now

they were all trying to get his attention. A ring of excited, gesturing men and women formed round him as he moved through the room. For one another they had uneasy, hostile glares. The parallel-club system had been successful: to one another they were strangers.

"Can we start?" Ralf Butler demanded.

"Soon," Cartwright answered. He moved on among them, aware of the tension. But another ten minutes wouldn't make any difference.

Jack McLean glanced up and grinned at Cartwright. "Not long? It's about time."

Cartwright felt in his pockets. Somewhere he had a crumpled, often-folded list of names. And on the back was a short speech he planned to deliver before the line of cars hidden in the underground garage lumbered off.

"What are you looking for?" Mary Uzich asked. "A writer?"

He found the list and carefully unfolded it. Names had been entered, crossed off, and re-entered. He smoothed it out and made an attention-attracting sound. It was unnecessary; he was surrounded by a ring of eager faces.

A bewildering variety of people. Mexican labourers mute and frightened. A hard-faced urban couple. A jet stoker. Japanese workmen. A red-lipped girl. The middle-aged owner of a retail store that had failed. An agronomy student. A salesman. A cook. A nurse. A carpenter. All of them perspiring, shoving, listening, watching intently.

These were people with skill in their hands, not their heads. Their ability had come from years of practice, from direct contact with work. They could grow plants, sink foundations, repair leaking pipes, maintain machinery, weave clothing, cook meals. According to the classification system they were failures.

"I think everybody's here," Rita O'Neill said. "You can go ahead."

Cartwright took a deep breath of prayer and raised his voice.

"I want to say something before the cars leave. The ship has been checked over and it's supposed to be ready for deep-space flight."

"That's correct," Captain Groves said impassively. He was a stern-faced Negro, big and solemn and dignified.

Cartwright rattled his scrap of crumpled metal foil.

"Well, this is it. Anybody want to back out?"

Excitement and tension, but none of them stirred.

"This is what we've been working for. Now the parallel-club system can be disbanded; you're seeing each other face to face. During the flight you'll get to know each other. I hope you get along."

Faint, nervous smiles.

"This is the Society." Cartwright managed to get a half-joking note in his voice. "You people are *it.* This is all of us."

They peered good-naturedly at each other. Opinions were forming fast; perhaps too fast.

"You'll be jammed in tight," Cartwright continued. "This isn't a pleasure ship; it's a run-down General Motors ore freighter ready for the scrap heap. But it's all we could afford. Maybe if some rich woman had given a few million more..."

No smiles. It was too bitterly painful. The money had been squeezed out of these people dollar by dollar; it had been turned over to the Society with hope, faith and agonizing doubts.

"I wish John Preston were here," Cartwright said. "He'd be glad to see this, if he were alive. He knew it would come, some day." He examined his watch and then finished what he had to say. "Good luck! You're on your way. Hold your charms and let Groves do the steering."

It took a moment to sink in. Then the roar of shock billowed up and slapped him violently.

"You son of a bitch!" Ralf Butler screamed in terror. "You're not coming with us!"

It was amazing, Cartwright thought in a detached way, how fast the mood of a group could change.

"You're afraid!" Butler shouted. "You want *us* to go out there but you won't come with us."

"What's going on?" Bill Konklin demanded suspiciously. There was apprehension, mixed with growing anger. "Explain, Leon."

"I'm not coming," Cartwright admitted. "You'll be in Groves's hands. He's a good navigator."

"Isn't there anything out there?" Janet Sibley asked anxiously. "Don't you believe any more? Have you changed your mind, Mr. Cartwright?"

"You know the reason," Jack McLean snorted. "Nobody wants to die out there in dead space. Nobody wants to wander around with those space monsters."

"There's nothing out there," Flood snapped contemptuously. "He knows why those astronomers back in 'forty saw nothing. They tried to find it; they did everything they could."

"Tell us why you're not coming," Jereti said. He raised his gnarled hands for silence. "He must have some good reason."

Cartwright took a deep breath of dry, stale air. "Sorry," he said. "I can't tell you my reason."

"See?" Butler shouted wildly. "He knows we're going to die out there. *He knows it isn't there."*

Rita O'Neill's eyes blazed. "You ought to send them home," she said to Cartwright.

"It's a racket," McLean muttered ominously.

"It is not a racket!" Groves retorted. His dark face flushed. "The

Society has never been a racket."

"It'd be nice," Bill Konklin said, "if you could tell us a little more. It seems unfair to send us off without some kind of an explanation."

"You'll know one of these days." Cartwright said quietly.

He was going to say more but Rita O'Neill suddenly pushed against him to thrust a sliver of sealed metal foil in his hand.

"From Sam Oster." The look on her face told him what it was. "Code-monitored from his first television transmission."

Cartwright slit the plastic seal and examined the metal foil. Then he stuffed it into his pocket.

"There's nothing more," he said sharply to the group. "Collect your personal possessions and climb into the cars. I'm not going with you. Good-bye and good luck."

Nat Gardner's eyes blazed with fury. "You're not even coming down to the *field?*"His sluggish brain moved into action as he started resentfully towards Cartwright.

"Take it easy," Konklin said. Groves moved up to him, and Gardner reluctantly stopped. "Keep your hands to yourself."

Doctor Flood grinned slyly at Cartwright. "You had everybody fooled—even me." Behind his thick glasses his eyes danced knowingly. "And the supply rooms—they're full of sand, I suppose?"

Groves headed for the exit slot. "The ship's ready to take off."

A few of the group collected their things and followed him, still darting baffled, uncertain glances at Cartwright.

Cartwright stood with his hands in his pockets, saying nothing and waiting for them to leave. A few lingered.

"Something important is going on," Mary Uzich said to him in a low, shrewd voice. "When will we know?"

"Soon," Cartwright said.

"I think you handled this wrong," Bill Konklin said to Cartwright. "You shouldn't send them out this way. They have a right to know."

"I trust you, Mr. Cartwright," Janet Sibley gasped timidly, sweeping past Cartwright with an armload of things.

The Japanese optical workers bowed stiffly, smiled, and hurried out. Gradually the room emptied. Butler and Flood shot looks of suspicion at Cartwright, then reluctantly followed the others. Presently only Cartwright and his black-eyed niece remained.

Cartwright sagged. "I'm glad that's over."

Rita was breathing rapidly. "How *dare* they talk to you like that?"

"They're afraid. The unknown is always worse than the known."

"Are we going to keep the office open?" Rita moved swiftly about the room, putting things in order. "Keep printing leaflets?"

Cartwright didn't answer.

"I never pictured the great moment like this. They spoiled it by

questioning you and attacking you. They have no faith."

"Can't be helped," Cartwright said mildly.

Rita came to his side. "You know, it's really happened."

Yes, it had happened... up to a point. He, as leader of the Preston Society, had managed to get himself selected as the new Quizmaster. That in itself was no small feat; in addition, he had manoeuvred the Society's ship into the first lap of a long journey. He had done a great thing for their pioneer, John Preston, and for mankind itself. But——

"How long do you suppose it'll take them to set up the Challenge Convention?" In a sudden, gloomy rush of emotion he told the girl: "I can keep my new power, protect the ship, for only so long—and then they'll destroy me."

"Are they aware of the ship?" Rita asked uneasily.

"I don't believe so. I hope not." He grimaced half in amusement, half in rueful despair. "Otherwise what am I in this Quizmaster business for? Why have I brought about all this? It's the ship that's important; everything else is subordinate."

"But the ship's safe; it's about to be launched."

"The ship will leave Earth. I've stabilized the situation to that point. But it's not only the danger here, the menace from the Hills. *There's danger within the ship, too.* Soon they'll hear on the ipvic that I'm Quizmaster. That's when they'll decide to turn round."

"You think they'd turn the ship?" Rita asked

"Certainly."

"Not Groves. And he's the only one who can navigate."

"All they have to do is contact one of the Hill ports, on any of the nine planets. A patrol ship will be sent out, and a Hill crew will take over the ship."

"Is that going to happen?"

"I don't know," Cartwright answered truthfully. "Some will instantly want to give up, turn the ship round or call a patrol boat. Others, like Groves, wouldn't consider turning back." His lean old face seemed to sag with fatigue.

From outside the building came the sound of jets. A ship setting on the roof in a metallic whirr. A staggering thump, then voices and quick movements on the floors above as the roof trap was yanked open. Rita saw the look on Cartwright's face, the momentary terror, the flash of *awareness.* Then a mild weariness filmed over him and he smiled wryly.

"They're here," he said. "It didn't take long."

His smile broadened as heavy military boots sounded in the metal-lined corridor. "You ought to go," he told Rita thoughtfully. "I'll talk to them alone."

Rita moved a few hesitant steps away.

"Go on," Cartwright ordered sharply. Then he turned to the soldiers stepping gingerly into the meeting chamber.

* * *

The Directorate guards fanned out in the meeting chamber. After them came a Directorate official with a brief-case gripped in one hand. More jets were landing, on the roof and on the pavement outside. The sound of traffic died; the street was being sealed off. Two heavy cargo-carrying transports rumbled down the suddenly deserted street and began discharging ugly-snouted cannon.

"You're Leon Cartwright," the official said. He glanced briefly at Cartwright and then put down his case. Opening and leafing through a notebook he said: "Give me your papers."

Cartwright slid his plastic tube from his inside coat pocket, unsnapped the seal and spread out the thin metal foil. One by one he laid papers on the table. "Birth certificate. School and training records. Psycho-analysis. Medical certificate. Criminal record. Status permit. Statement of fealty history. Last fealty release. All the rest." He pushed the heap towards the official, removed his coat and rolled up his sleeve.

The official glanced at the papers, then compared the identification tabs with the markings seared deep in the flesh of Cartwright's forearm. "We'll have to examine fingerprints and brain pattern later. Actually, this is superfluous; I know you're Leon Cartwright." He pushed back the papers. "I'm Major Shaeffer, from the Directorate. There was a change in control this morning.

Major Shaeffer touched Cartwright's status permit. "You're not classified?"

"No."

"I suppose your power-card was collected by your protector, Hill. That's usual, isn't it?"

"That's the system," Cartwright said. "But I'm not under fief to any Hill. I was discharged earlier this year."

Shaeffer shrugged. "Then of course you put your power-card on the blackmarket." He closed his notebook with a snap. "One way or another, classifieds managed to get hold of power-cards."

Cartwright laid his card on the table. "There's mine."

Shaeffer was astounded. "Incredible!" He rapidly scanned Cartwright's face. "You knew already. You knew this was coming."

"Yes."

"We came instantly. The news hasn't even reached Verrick; you're the first person outside the Corps to know." He moved close to

Cartwright. *"How did you know it was coming?"*

"That two-headed calf," Cartwright said vaguely.

"We'll take up positions here. In a few minutes Verrick will be informed. We want to be ready." The official pushed Cartwright's power-card into his hand. "Hang on to this. It's your sole claim to your new position."

Cartwright pocketed the power-card carefully.

Shaeffer licked his lips reflectively. "You're now our superior and Verrick is nothing. It may be some time before we can make the psychological change-over. Some of the younger Corps members who don't remember any other Quizmaster..." He shrugged. "I suggest that you place yourself in Corps hands for a while. We can't stay here, and a lot of people at Batavia have personal fealties to Verrick, not to the position. Verrick has been using them to gain control over the Hills."

"I'm glad you came," Cartwright admitted. "When I heard the noise I thought it was Verrick."

"It would have been, if we had notified him. If it hadn't been for the older guards we probably would have told him first and taken our time getting here. Peter Wakeman made a big thing of responsibility, and duty."

Cartwright made a mental note. He would have to look up Peter Wakeman.

"As we approached," Shaeffer continued slowly, "our first group of psychics picked up the thoughts of a number of people, apparently leaving here. Your name was in their minds, and this location. They were moving away from us, so we couldn't catch much. Something about a ship. Something to do with a long flight."

"You sound like a Government fortune-teller."

"There was an atmosphere of excitement and fear. And some anger."

"Creditors, perhaps."

"One thought was passed on to me. You might file it away. Somebody in that group was pleasantly contemplating you lying dead with a crushed-in skull."

In the courtyard outside the Society building Rita O'Neill stood watching the unit rising into the mid-morning sky. One by one the elements disappeared in the direction of Batavia.

She walked in a circle, suddenly lost. The great moment had come and gone.

Against the Society building stood the small crypt in which the remains of John Preston lay. She could see his dark, ill-formed body suspended within the yellowed, fly-specked plasti-cube, hands folded over his bird-like chest, eyes shut, glasses eternally superfluous. The crypt was dusty; trash and debris were littered about it. Nobody came

to see Preston's remains. A forgotten, lonely monument, housing a dismal shape of clay.

Half a mile away the fleet of archaic cars was unloading its passengers. The battered ore freighter was jammed tight on the launcher; the people were clumsily climbing the narrow metal ramp into the unfamiliar hull.

The fanatics were setting out to locate and claim the mythical tenth planet of the Sol System. The legendary Flame Disc, John Preston's fabulous world beyond the known universe.

Chapter III

Before Cartwright reached the Directorate buildings at Batavia the news was out. He sat fixedly watching the television screen as the high-speed intercon rocket hurtled across the South Pacific sky. Below them spread the blue ocean and endless black dots, conglomerations of metal and plastic houseboats on which Asiatic families lived. Fragile platforms stretched from Hawaii to Ceylon.

The screen was wild with excitement. Faces blinked on and off; scenes shifted with bewildering rapidity. The history of Verrick's ten years was shown: shots of the massive, thick-browed ex-Quizmaster and summaries of what he had accomplished. And vague reports on Cartwright.

He laughed in a nervous aside that made the others start. Nothing was known about him, only that he was somehow connected with the Preston Society. The newsmachines had dug up as much as possible on the Society: it wasn't much. The story of John Preston himself, of the frail man creeping from the Information Libraries to the observatories, writing his books, collecting facts, arguing futilely. Finally, death in obscurity. The first meeting of the Society. The printing of Preston's half-crazy, half-prophetic books...

That was all they knew (he hoped). Cartwright kept his eyes on the screen.

He was now the supreme power in the nine-planet system. Quizmaster, surrounded by a telepathic Corps, with a vast army and warfleet and police force at his disposal. He was unopposed administrator of the whole structure, of the vast apparatus of classification, Quizzes and lotteries and training schools.

On the other hand, there were the five Hills, the industrial framework that supported the social and political system.

"How far did Verrick get?" he asked Major Shaeffer.

"He did fairly well. By August he would have eliminated most of the things he wanted eliminated."

"Where is Verrick now?"

"He left Batavia for the Chemie Hill, where he's strongest. He'll operate from there; we got some of his plans."

"I can see your Corps is going to be invaluable."

"Up to a point. Our job is to protect you: that's all we do. We're not spies or agents. We guard your life."

"What's been the ratio in the past?"

"The Corps came into existence a hundred and sixty years ago. Since then we've protected fifty-nine Quizmasters. Of that number we've been able to save eleven from the Challenge."

"How long did they last?"

"Some minutes, some years. Verrick lasted longest, although there was old McRae, back in 'seventy-eight, who ran his whole thirteen years. For him the Corps intercepted over three hundred Challengers."

"A telepathic Corps," Cartwright mused, "to protect me, public assassins to murder me."

"Only one assassin at a time. Of course, you could be murdered by an amateur unsanctioned by the Convention. Somebody with a grudge. But that's rare."

"Give me my length ratio."

"Average, two weeks."

Two weeks! And Verrick was shrewd. The Challenge Conventions wouldn't be sporadic affairs put together by isolated individuals hungry for power. Verrick would have everything organized. Efficient, concerted machinery turning out one assassin after another, creeping to Batavia until at last Leon Cartwright was destroyed.

"In your mind," Shaeffer said, "is an interesting vortex of the usual fear and a very unusual syndrome I can't analyze. Something about a ship."

"You're permitted to scan whenever you feel like it?"

"I can't help it. If I sat here talking you couldn't help hearing me. When I'm with a group their thoughts blur, like a party of people all babbling at once. But there's just you and me here."

"The ship is on its way," Cartwright said.

"It won't get far. The first planet it tries to squat, Mars or Jupiter or Ganymede——"

"The ship is going all the way out. We're not setting up another squatters' colony."

"You're counting a lot on that old ore-carrier."

"Everything we have is there."

"You think *you* can hold on long enough?"

"I hope so."

"So do I," Shaeffer said dispassionately. He gestured towards the island coming into existence ahead and below. "When we land there will be an agent of Verrick's waiting for you."

"Already?"

"Not an assassin. There's been no Challenge convention yet. This man is under fief to Verrick. A personal staff member named Herb Moore. He's been searched for weapons and passed. He just wants to talk to you."

"How do you know this?"

"During the last few minutes I've been getting the Corps headquarters. You have nothing to worry about: at least two of us will be with you when you talk to him."

"Suppose I don't want to talk?"

"That's your privilege."

Cartwright snapped off the television as the ship lowered over the magnetic grapples. "What do you recommend?"

"Hear what he has to say. It'll give you an idea what you're up against."

Herbert Moore was a handsome blond man in his early thirties. He rose gracefully as Cartwright, Shaeffer and two other Corpsmen entered the main lounge of the Directorate building.

"Greetings," Moore said to Shaeffer.

Shaeffer pushed open the doors to the inner offices and stood aside as Cartwright entered. This was the first time the new Quizmaster had seen his inheritance. He stood in the doorway, completely entranced by the sight.

He wandered over to the desk and touched the polished mahogany surface. "I had all the abstract significance figured out. Power to do this, power to do that. I had it all down in symbolized form, but the sight of this big desk——"

"This isn't your desk," Major Shaeffer said "This is your secretary's desk. Eleanor Stevens."

"Then where is she?"

"She left with Verrick." Shaeffer slammed the door, leaving Herb Moore in the lounge outside. "She came to the Corps after Verrick was Quizmaster. She was seventeen and Verrick was the only person she ever served. After a couple of years she changed her oath from what we call a positional oath to a personal oath. When Verrick left she packed up her stuff and went with him. Interesting that such personal loyalty could be built up. As far as I know, there's no romantic relationship. In fact, she's been the mistress of Moore, the young man waiting outside."

Cartwright roamed round the luxurious office, examining file cabinets, the massive ipvic sets, the chairs, the desk, the paintings. "Where's my office?"

Shaeffer kicked open a heavy door. He and the other Corpsmen followed Cartwright past a series of check-points into a bleak chamber. "Big, but not as lush," Shaeffer said. "Verrick was a realist. When he came this was a sort of Arabian erotic house: girls, couches, drink, music, colours. Verrick sent the girls to the Martian work-camps, tore down the fixtures and gingerbread, and built *this."* Shaeffer rapped on the wall; it echoed dully. "Bomb-proof, shielded from radiation, has its own air-pumping system, its own temperature and humidity controls, its own food supply." He opened a cupboard.

The cupboard was a small arsenal.

"Verrick could handle every kind of gun known. Nobody can get

into this room except through the regular door. Or——" He ran his hands over one of the walls. "Verrick designed this. When it was finished all the workmen were sent off to the camps. During the final hours the Corps was excluded."

"Why?"

"Verrick had equipment installed that he didn't intend to use while Quizmaster. However, we dealt with some of the workmen." He slid a section of wall aside. "This is Verrick's special passage. Ostensibly, it leads out; in reality, *it leads in."*

The passage opened up behind the desk; it wasn't hard to picture the wall sliding back and an assassin emerging directly behind the new Quizmaster. "Should I have it sealed up?"

"We'll sow gas capsules under the flooring, the length of the passage, and forget about it. The assassin will be dead before he reaches here."

Shaeffer shrugged.

Cartwright managed to ask: "Is there anything else I ought to know at this point?"

"You ought to hear Moore. He's a top-flight biochemist, a genius. He controls the Chemie research labs; this is the first time he's been here for years. We've been trying to scan something on his work but, frankly, the information is too technical for us."

One of the Corpsmen, a dapper man with moustache and thinning hair, spoke up: "It would be interesting to know how much of that stuff Moore formulates in technical jargon just to throw us off."

"This is Peter Wakeman," Shaeffer said.

Cartwright and Wakeman shook hands. The Corpsman's fingers were dainty, fragile, diffident fingers. It was hard to believe that this was the man who headed the Corps. who had swung it away from Verrick at the critical moment.

The guard showed equal interest in the tall old man.

"How does one become a Prestonite? Preston was an astronomer who got the observatories to watch for his planet—right? They found nothing. Preston went out after it and died in his ship. Yes, I once thumbed through *Flame Disc.* The man who owned it was a crackpot. I tried to analyse him; a chaotic jumble of passions."

"How do I analyse?" Cartwright asked tightly.

There was absolute silence. The guards were all at work on him; he forced his attention on the elaborate television set and ignored them.

"About the same," Wakeman said presently. "You've got everything tied up in your ship. If it goes down that's the end of you."

"It won't go down," Cartwright said.

"After you've talked to Moore," Wakeman said, "it'll be interesting

to see if you still predict success."

Herb Moore rose as Cartwright and Wakeman entered the lounge.

"What do you want?" Cartwright demanded.

"Let's put it this way. You're in. Verrick is out. You hold the supreme position in the system. Right?"

Moore began pacing about, cheeks flushed with excitement, gesturing vividly, highly animated by the flow of words beginning to pour out of his mouth.

"Reese Verrick was Quizmaster for ten years. He was Challenged daily and he met every Challenge. Essentially, Verrick is a skilled leader. He operated this job with more knowledge and ability than all the Quizmasters before him put together."

"Except McRae," Shaeffer pointed out, as he entered the lounge.

Cartwright felt sick. He threw himself into one of the chairs and lay wearily back as it adjusted itself to his posture. The argument continued without him; the words that flowed between the Corpsmen and Verrick's bright young man were remote, dreamlike.

In many ways Herb Moore was right. He *had* blundered into somebody else's office, position and problems. He wondered vaguely where the ship was. Unless something had gone wrong it would soon be heading out towards Mars and the asteroid belt.

Who wanted him dead?

Moore's sharp voice brought him back. He sat up and opened his eyes.

"All right!" Moore was saying excitedly. "The word's gone out on the ipvic. The Convention will probably be held at the Westinghouse Hill; there's more hotel space there."

"Yes," Wakeman was saying tightly, "that's the usual place for the murderers to collect."

The Challenge Convention.

Cartwright got unsteadily to his feet. "I want to talk to Moore. You two clear out of here."

The men conferred silently, then moved towards the door.

"Be careful," Wakeman warned him. "You've had a lot of emotional shocks today. Your thalamic index is too high."

Cartwright closed the door and turned to face Moore. "Now we can get this settled once and for all."

Moore smiled confidently. "Anything you say, Mr. Cartwright. You're the boss."

"I'm not your boss."

"No, that's so. A few of us stayed loyal to Reese."

"You must think a lot of him."

Moore's expression showed that he did.

"Reese Verrick is a big man, Mr. Cartwright. He's done a lot of big

things."

"What do you want me to do? Give him back his position?" Cartwright heard his own voice waver with emotion. "I'm here and I'm staying here. You can't intimidate me! You can't laugh me out!"

Cartwright tried to keep his hands from shaking. He was excited; he could hardly speak. And he was afraid.

"You can't operate this," Moore said quietly. "This isn't your line. *What are you? I* examined the records. You were born on 5 October, 2140, outside the Imperial Hill. You've lived there all your life; this is the first time you've been on this side of Earth, let alone on another planet. You had ten years of nominal schooling in the charity department of the Imperial Hill. From high school onwards you took courses, in welding, and electronic repair and that sort of thing. After you left school you designed a few circuit improvements but the Directorate rejected your patents."

"The improvements," Cartwright said with difficulty, "were used a year later."

"Then you became embittered. You tried many times to win a classification but you never had enough theoretical knowledge. When you were forty-nine you gave up. When you were fifty you joined this Preston Society."

"I had been attending meetings for six years."

"There weren't many members at the time, and finally you were elected Presidents. You put all your money and time into the crazy thing. It's become a mania." Moore beamed happily, as if solving an intricate equation. "This position—Quizmaster over billions of people, endless quantities of men and material... . *And you see all this only as a means of expanding your Society."*

Cartwright caught his breath.

"What are you going to do?" Moore persisted. "Print a few trillion copies of Preston's tracts? Distribute immense 3-D pictures of him? You already have *one* shrine—his remains in a wooden building in the Imperial slums—the remains of the saint, to be touched and prayed over. Is that what you're planning—a new religion? Are you going to organize vast armadas to search for his mystic planet? Are we *all* going to spend our time combing space for his Flame Disc, or whatever he called it. Remember Robin Pitt, Quizmaster number thirty-four. Nineteen years old, read ancient books, painted pictures, wrote psychiatric stream-of-consciousness material."

"Poetry."

"He was Quizmaster one week; then the Challenge got him."

"I was thirteen when he was murdered."

"Remember what he had planned for mankind? Think back. Why does the Challenge-process exist? To protect us; it bestows and

deprives indiscriminately. Nobody can hold power; nobody knows what his status will be next year, next week. Nobody can scheme to be a dictator. The Challenge protects us from something else—from incom- petents, from fools and madmen. No despots, no crackpots."

"I'm not a crackpot," Cartwright muttered hoarsely.

"You think you can adjust yourself to your new status?" Moore asked.

"Yes!"

"You have twenty-four hours. That's about how long it takes to convene a Challenge Convention and pick the first candidate. There should be a lot to choose from."

Cartwright's thin body jerked. "Why?"

"Verrick has offered a million dollars to the one who gets you. The offer stands... until you're dead."

Cartwright was vaguely aware that Wakeman had come into the lounge and was moving up to Moore. The two of them walked away.

A million gold dollars! There'd be plenty of takers. The best minds would gamble their lives for that, in a society that was a constant gamble, an unceasing lottery.

Wakeman came over to him, shaking his head. "What a distorted mind—bodies, bombs, assassins. We sent him off."

"What he said is true," Cartwright gasped. "I have no place here."

"His strategy is to make you think that."

"But it's true!"

Wakeman nodded reluctantly. "I know. That's why it's good strategy. We have a good plan, too, I think. You'll know about it later."

The battered, weary ore freighter left the regular commercial lanes as it moved towards the side of Mars. Jupiter was on the far side of the sun; the lanes were at a minimum density, split between the two planets. When out of the slowly-moving stream of transports the ship began to reach significant velocities. Its bulkheads rattled. Metallic dust rained down in the drumming corridors as it sped through a void of silence, darkness, emptiness.

In the gloomy hold the fifty men and women who made up the Preston Society sat in a nervous circle, waiting timidly for Konklin to begin.

Konklin studied the bookshelf that Bruno Jereti had erected.

"Here they are," he said. *"The Dispossessed. Mathematics of Madness. The Unicorn. Flame Disc."* He dragged down a bulky binder. "His books, all his unpublished notes, his records; drawings he made of his vision, his computations, instructions, analysis, poetry, his philosophy—everything." He turned to the expectant people, "What'll it be tonight?"

"Flame Disc," Janet Sibley said quickly. "It's so inspiring."

Konklin slid the well-worn copy down and flipped it open, sat on a heap of bedding, and glanced around.

"Go ahead," Mary Uzich said eagerly. "We need *something* to buck us up."

In a throbbing baritone, Konklin read aloud from the concluding section of John Preston's last book.

"In the far reaches of space He has placed another world, an untouched Disc, a Second Earth, hidden and concealed from prying eyes. There He has put it, safe in dusky reaches, the terrifying dead regions, where the coward-folk dare not venture. He knew that gibbering vampires, their own guilt, would pluck at them, would torment them in their shoddy tin ships, until they maddened and died —and returned empty-handed..."

"That part," Groves interrupted ponderously, "refers to Herman R. Ewing, the navigator on the 'eighty-nine expedition. He went insane from space fear. He claimed that the ship was being pursued by fabulous space monsters."

Konklin read on, carried away by the fervour of the dead founder of the Society.

"This Disc, this glowing orb, for all eyes yet somehow hidden, was sent to swim in the sea of meteor dust and galactic wastes throughout the ages. Until at last a brave crowd, would venture forth. Giants, with the courage of giants... ."

Chapter IV

Ted benteley stood by the kitchen door inhaling warm smells. The Davis house was pleasant and bright. Al Davis, minus his shoes, was sitting contentedly before the television set in the living room. His pretty brown-haired wife, Laura, was preparing dinner.

"If that's protine," Benteley said to her, "it's the best job of adulteration I've smelled."

"We never have protine," Laura answered briskly. "You can taste it no matter how they disguise it. It's terrible costly to buy natural foods, of course, but it's worth it."

"Protine," Al said, overhearing her, "saved the ordinary people from starvation back in the twentieth century. Allow me to pass on a few facts."

"Please do!"

"Protine isn't a natural algae. It's a mutant that started out in culture tanks in the middle East and gradually crept on to a variety of fresh-water surfaces."

"When I go into the bathroom in the morning don't I find the darn stuff growing all over the place?"

"It also grows over the Great Lakes," Al said scientifically.

"Well, this isn't protine," Laura said to Ted. "This is real roast beef, real potatoes and green peas and white rolls."

"You two are living better than when I last saw you," Benteley commented. "What happened?"

"Al jumped a whole class. He beat the Government Quiz; we studied together every night."

"I never heard of anybody beating the Quizzes. Was it mentioned on television?"

Laura frowned resentfully.

"That awful Sam Oster talked about it the whole length of a programme. He's that rabble-rouser who has such a big following."

"Afraid I don't know him," Benteley admitted.

"The Convention," Davis said, indicating the television screen, "are advertising for applicants. Giving quite a bonus."

A vortex of foaming light and colour lapping across the screen symbolized the Challenge Convention. The billowing mass broke apart, then reformed in new combinations.

"What's it saying?" Benteley asked.

"I can switch to the literal-channel, if you like."

Laura hurried in with silver and china for the table. "Don't put the literal-channel on; all the dullards watch that. This for us, the literal for them."

"You're wrong, honey," Al said seriously. "The literal-channel is for news and factual information. The symbolic channel is for pleasure. I enjoy watching it this way, but——" He waved his hand and the circuit switched abruptly. The vivid swirls of colour and sound winked out. In their place the placid features of a news announcer appeared. "Here's the same thing."

Laura returned to the kitchen in a flurry of activity. The living-room was friendly and comfortable. One wall was transparent; below the house stretched the city of Berlin clustered round the A.G. Chemie Hill, a towering cone, black against the night sky. Bits of light drifted in the gloom—surface cars dancing like sparks in the shadows.

"How long have you been in fealty to Verrick?" Benteley asked Al Davis.

"About three or four years."

"You're satisfied?"

"Why not?" Al indicated the pleasant, well-furnished living-room. "Who wouldn't be?"

"You knew I'd sworn loyalty to him?"

Davis's kindly face beamed up at Benteley. "I hope that means you'll be moving over here."

"Why?"

Davis blinked. "Well, because then we'll see more of you and Julie."

"I haven't been living with Julie for six months," Benteley said impatiently. "That's all off. She's on Jupiter as a work-camp official."

"I didn't know. I haven't seen you for two years."

"I came over with Verrick and his staff." Benteley's voice hardened. "When Oiseau-Lyre released me I headed for Batavia. I wanted to get out of the Hill system once and for all. I went straight to Reese Verrick."

"You did the right thing."

"Verrick tricked me! He was out of the Directorate completely. I knew somebody was bidding for the Hills. I wanted nothing to do with it—and now look!" Benteley's resentment increased. "Instead of getting away from it I'm where it's dirtiest."

Indignation crept into Davis's tolerant face. "Some of the nicest people I know are Verrick's serfs."

"People who don't care how they make money."

"You want to penalize Verrick because he's a success? He's *made* this Hill; is it his fault nobody else can operate like he can? There's a natural selection and evolution. Those who can't survive fall by the way."

"Verrick fired our research labs."

"Our? You're with Verrick, now!" Davis's indignation boiled over.

"Verrick is your protector and you're standing here——"

"All right, boys," Laura exclaimed, back from her kitchen. "Dinner's on the table."

Benteley pulled up a couple of chairs and sat down moodily.

"Don't look so sad," Laura said to him. "See what you're getting to eat. Aren't you living with Julie any more? I'll bet you eat at restaurants where they serve that awful protine stuff."

Benteley said presently: "When I saw you last you were living in a Hill dormitory. But you weren't married then."

"Remember when you and I were living together?" Laura asked. "That wasn't more than a month."

"A little under a month," Benteley agreed. He relaxed somewhat, thawed by the smell of hot food, the bright living-room, the pretty woman sitting opposite him. "That's when you were still under fealty to Oiseau-Lyre, before you lost your classification."

Benteley listened to the television between conversations, his mind on only half of what Laura and Al were saying.

"... Quizmaster Cartwright has announced the dismissal of two hundred Directorate employees," the announcer was saying. "The reason given is b.s.r."

"Bad security risk," Laura murmured. "That's what they always say."

"... Convention plans are booming. Applications are flooding the Convention Board and the Westinghouse Hill office. Reese Verrick, the former Quizmaster, has agreed to handle the technical details that will set in motion the most spectacular event of the decade."

"Is old Judge Waring still on the Board?" Laura asked Al. "He must be a hundred years old."

"He won't resign, not until he's dead."

"But he knows everything about the Challenge," Laura said.

The television had changed announcers. A view of the massive auditorium in which the Convention was being held swam into focus. Seats were already up, and the huge platform at which the Board sat in judgment. People milled back and forth; the auditorium boomed and echoed with sounds of furious activity.

"... Reese Verrick's offer of a million dollars has galvanized the Convention proceedings. Statisticians estimate a record number of applications. Everybody is eager to try his hand at the most daring role in the system, the greatest risk and the highest stakes. The eyes of six billion people on nine planets are turned on the Westinghouse Hill tonight. Who will be the first assassin? Out of these many brilliant applicants, representing all classes and Hills, who will be the first to try his hand for the prize and the acclamation of a whole civilization?"

"How about you?" Laura said suddenly to Benteley. "Why don't

you put in an application?"

"Not my line!"

"Make it your line! Al, haven't we that big tape they put out—all the successful assassins of the past, their lives and everything about them? Show it to Ted." "I've seen it," Benteley said curtly.

"... Experts predict that the first assassin will have a seventy-thirty chance of destroying Quizmaster Cartwright and winning the prize put up by Reese Verrick, the previous Quizmaster. If the first assassin fails, the betting is sixty-forty on the second. Cartwright will have better control over his army and telepathic Corps after the initial two days. For the assassin, speed rather than form will count in the opening phase. During the last lap the situation will be tight because..."

Laura leaned contentedly back, a cigarette between her fingers, and smiled at Benteley.

"Think you'll move your things here to Chemie? You could stay with us until you find a decent place."

Al picked a date from a bowl. He ate it slowly. "Too sweet. What planet's it from? Venus? It tastes like one of those pulpy Venusian fruits."

"It's from Asia Minor," Laura said.

"Here on Earth? Who muted it?"

"Nobody; it's a natural fruit. From a palm tree."

Benteley got slowly to his feet. "Laura, I have to get going."

Al rose in amazement. "Why?"

"I have to collect my things from Oiseau-Lyre."

Al thumped him on the shoulder. "You're one of Verrick's serfs now; give the Hill traffic office a call and they'll arrange it."

"I'd rather do it myself," Benteley said.

"Why?" Laura asked, surprised.

"Less things get broken," Benteley evaded.

Al went on: "You'd better get your stuff here as soon as possible. Sometimes Verrick wants a person quickly, and when he wants you quickly———"

"The hell with Verrick!" Benteley snapped.

Their shocked looks followed him as he moved from the table.

"... more than ten thousand already, from all parts of Earth. Judge Waring's announcement that the first assassin will be chosen at this session——"

Al whistled appreciatively. "Verrick doesn't waste any time."

Benteley crouched down and snapped the television off. The sounds and images faded as he rose to his feet.

"You mind?" he asked. "I'm tired of the Convention and everything about it."

"It won't be for a time, anyhow," Al said, seeking to smooth things

out. "They're still testing equipment."

"I went to Batavia expecting to get in on something big," Benteley continued. "Something beyond people grabbing for power, struggling to get to the top of the heap over each other's dead bodies."

Al Davis extended a chubby finger.

"Reese Verrick will be back in the number One spot inside a week. His money picks the assassin. The assassin is under fealty to him. When he kills this Cartwright person the limelight returns to Verrick. Wait a week, man. It'll be back the way it was."

Laura appeared at the doorway, her face flooded with peevish anxiety. "Al, couldn't we get the Convention? I can hear Judy Klein's set down the hall and they're choosing the assassin *now!"*

"I'll turn it on," Benteley said wearily. "I'm going, anyhow." He snapped on the power and as he moved towards the front door a thick voice swelled from the speakers out into the room.

"Oh, heavens!" Laura moaned, "it's that Sam Oster. Turn him off and get the Convention!"

Benteley closed the door, and with the grumble of Oster's voice still in his ears plunged down the dark path.

Sitting at his desk, his script gripped in his beefy, thick-fingered hands, his bull-neck jutting forward, his square face set in a rigid block, Sam Oster addressed his invisible audience with great care, picking each word with studied precision and letting it grind out harshly and methodically.

The engineers monitoring the transmission were following the Convention on another channel.

Oster clutched his script convulsively and read on. Sweat rolled down the gulleys of his flat, broken nose, down to his cracked lips and stubbled chin. Breathing hoarsely, he finished his speech and lay back exhausted as the indifferent engineers switched to the next programme.

He had ceased recording. A chance observation had disclosed that the ipvic technicians were speeding up the tape slightly, turning his angry words into the squeaks of a mechanical gnome and his gestures into the twitches of a puppet.

He got to his feet and snatched up the dispatches from the newsmachines that had come in during his speech. He scanned them and then headed at a shambling gait for the sound-proof ipvic booth. A few moments later he was facing Leon Cartwright on a closed-circuit connection.

"This is late to call you," he said, "but I———"

"Wait!" Cartwright cut him off. His face was pale and drawn; dark circles were round his eyes. "I don't trust these ipvic lines. I'm having Tate—President of IPVIC— investigated. He may be tied with Verrick

in some way."

"Ipvic is a monopoly. If you don't use its lines you can't get your signal relayed to the ship." Oster ran his heavy hands along the so-called 'guarantee' meters; they alleged that the signal was not being tapped at any point. "And you have to keep in contact with the ship."

"I'm waiting as long as possible." Cartwright saw the wad of newstapes in Oster's fist. "What have you to tell me? I know you get first crack at the reports."

"Just one thing. It came over a few seconds ago; soon it'll be screeched from the public machines."

Cartwright's expression didn't change, but his knuckles whitened and he began rubbing his hands together as if to warm them. "They didn't waste any time."

Oster unrolled the tape. "His name is Keith Pellig."

"I've never heard of him."

"Me, neither. Strange; I've kept myself well posted on top-level material. But he must be something or Verrick wouldn't risk a million dollars on him." Savagely, Oster slammed the newstapes down. "Well, he's on his way. Get your Corps ready."

"Keith Pellig," Cartwright murmured.

"That's the assassin. The man who's going to kill you in cold blood."

Chapter V

The burnished wisp of grey slid silently in front of Ted Benteley. Its doors rolled back and a slim shape stepped out into darkness.

"Who is it?" Benteley demanded. Wind lashed through the moist foliage on the Davis house. Far-off sounds of activity echoed hollowly, and the Chemie Hill factories boomed dully.

"Where in God's name have you been?" a girl's clipped, anxious contralto asked. "Verrick sent for you an hour ago."

"I was here," Benteley answered.

Eleanor Stevens emerged quickly from the shadows. "You should have kept in touch when the ship landed. He's furious." She glanced nervously around. "Where's Davis? Inside?"

"Of course. What's all this about?"

"Don't get excited." The girl's voice was as taut as the frozen stars shining overhead. "Go back and get Davis and his wife. I'll wait in the car."

Al Davis gaped in amazement as he pushed open the front door and entered the room. "He wants us," Benteley said. "Tell Laura; he wants her, too."

Laura was sitting on the edge of the bed, unstrapping her sandals. She quickly smoothed her slacks down over her ankles as Al entered the bedroom. "Come on, honey," Al bade his wife.

"Is something wrong?" Laura leaped quickly up.

The three of them moved out into the chill night. Eleanor started up the car and rolled the doors shut; the car glided out on to the road and instantly gained speed. Dark houses and trees flashed past. Abruptly, with a sickening *whoosh,* the car rose above the pavement. It skimmed briefly, then arced high over a row of tension cables. A few minutes later it was gaining altitude over the sprawling mass of buildings and streets that made up the parasitic clusters round the Chemie Hill.

"What's this all about?" Benteley demanded. The car shuddered as magnetic grapple-beams caught it and lowered it towards the winking buildings below. "We have a right to know something."

"We're going to have a party," Eleanor said, with a smile that barely moved her lips. She allowed the car to come to rest against a magnetic disc; then she cut the power and threw open the doors. "Get out. We're here."

Their heels clattered in the deserted corridor as Eleanor led them from one level to the next. A few silent uniformed guards stood at regular intervals, their faces sleepy and impassive.

Eleanor waved open a double-sealed door and nodded them

briskly inside. Fragrant air greeted them as they pushed uncertainly past her.

Reese Verrick stood with his back to them. He was fumbling angrily with something, his massive arms moving in rage.

"How the hell do you work this thing?" he bellowed. There came a protesting shriek of torn metal. "Damn, I think I've broken it."

He turned, a huge hunched bear, with shaggy brows protruding belligerently. His blazing eyes bored into the three newcomers as they stood uneasily together. Eleanor Stevens unzipped her greatcoat and tossed it over the back of a luxurious couch.

"Here they are," she said to Verrick. "They were all together, enjoying themselves." She stalked over, long legged in her velvet slacks and leather sandals, and stood before the fire. In the flickering light her flesh glowed a deep luminous red.

Verrick turned without ceremony to Benteley. "Always be where I can find you." He spat his words out contemptuously. "I don't have any more teeps around to thought-wave people in. I have to find them the hard way." He jerked his thumb at Eleanor. "She came along, but minus ability."

Eleanor smiled bleakly and said nothing.

Verrick spun round and shouted at Herb Moore, who had emerged from a deep chair in the corner. "Is that damn thing fixed yet?"

"Almost."

Verrick grunted. "This is a sort of celebration," he said to Benteley, "although I don't know what about."

Herb Moore strolled over, confident and full of talk, a sleek little model of an interplan star rocket in his hands.

"We've got plenty to celebrate. This is the first time a Quizmaster chose an assassin. Pellig isn't somebody chosen by a bunch of senile fogies; Verrick has had him on tap and——"

"You talk too much," Verrick cut in. "You're too full of easy words."

Benteley moved uncomfortably away. Verrick was slightly drunk, but behind his clumsy movements was a mind that missed nothing.

The chamber was high-ceilinged and like a church, domed and ribbed, its roof dissolving in amber gloom.

Laura was examining tapestries that hung dead and heavy over the windows. On a mantel over the huge fireplace were battered Saxon cups. Benteley gingerly took one down. It was a ponderous lump in his hands.

"You'll meet Pellig in a few minutes," Verrick announced. "Eleanor and Moore have already met him."

Moore laughed, an offensive sharp bark, like that of a thin-

toothed dog.

"I've met him, all right," he said.

"He's cute," Eleanor said tonelessly.

Verrick continued: "Talk to him, stay with him. I want everybody to see him. I plan to send out only one assassin."

He strode to the closed double-doors at the end of the room and waved them open. Sound and rolling volumes of light billowed out.

"Get in there," Verrick ordered. "I'll find Pellig."

"A drink, sir or madam?"

Eleanor Stevens accepted a glass from the tray passed by a MacMillan robot. "What about you?" she said to Benteley. She brought the robot back and took a second glass. "Try it. Some kind of berry that grows on the sunward side of Callisto, in the cracks of a certain kind of shale. Verrick has a special work-camp to collect it."

Benteley took the glass. "Thanks."

"And cheer up."

"What's this all about?" Benteley indicated the packed cavern of murmuring people. They were all well dressed; every top-level class was represented. "I expect to see them start dancing."

"There was dinner and dancing earlier." Eleanor began to move off, her eyes intent on something. "Here they come."

A sudden rustle swept over the nearby people. They were all watching nervously, avidly, as Reese Verrick approached. With him was a slender man with arms loose at his sides, his face blank and expressionless. A ripple of sound swirled after him, the exclamations of tribute.

"That's him," Eleanor grated between her white teeth, eyes flashing. She grabbed fiercely at Benteley's arm. "That's Pellig. *Look at him."*

Pellig said nothing. His hair was straw-yellow, moist and limp. His features were uncertain, almost nondescript. A colourless, silent person almost lost from sight as the rolling giant beside him propelled him among the watching couples. After a moment the two of them were swallowed up by satin slacks and floor-length gowns, and the buzz of conversation was resumed.

Eleanor shivered.

"He gives me the creeps." She smiled up quickly at Benteley, still holding tight to his arm. "What do you think of him?"

"I didn't get any impression." In the distance Verrick was surrounded by a group of people, and Herb Moore's voice rose above the blur of sound: he was expounding again. Annoyed, Benteley moved a few steps away.

"Where are you going?" Eleanor asked.

"Home." The word slipped out involuntarily.

"Where do you mean?" Eleanor smiled wryly. "I can't analyse you any more. I gave all that up." She lifted her crimson hair to show the two dead circles above her ears, lead-grey spots that marred the smooth whiteness of her skin.

"I can't understand you," Benteley said, "discarding an ability you were born with."

"You sound like Wakeman. If I had stayed with the Corps I would have had to use my ability against Reese. So what else could I do but leave?" There was agony in her eyes. "You know, it's really gone. It's like being blinded. I screamed and cried a long time afterwards. I broke down completely."

"How are you now?"

She gestured shakily. "I'll live. Anyhow, I can't get it back. So forget it. Drink your drink and relax." She clinked glasses with him. "It's called *methane gale.* I suppose Callisto has a methane atmosphere."

"Have you ever been to one of the colony planets?" Benteley asked. He sipped at the amber liquid; it was strong stuff. "Have you ever seen one of the work-camps, or one of the squatters' colonies after a police patrol has finished with it?"

"I've never been off Earth. I was born in San Francisco nineteen years ago. All telepaths come from there, remember. During the Final War the big research installations at Livermore were hit by a soviet missile. Those who survived were badly injured. We're all descendants of one family, Earl and Verna Phillips. The whole Corps is related. I was trained all the time I was growing up."

Music had started up at one end of the chamber. A music robot of random combinations of sound, harmonic colours and shades that flitted agilely. Some couples started dancing listlessly. A group of men had gathered together and were arguing.

Near the double doors a few people were seeking their wraps and wandering away, dull-faced, vacant-eyed, mouths slack with fatigue and boredom.

Verrick's deep tones boomed out over everybody else's; he was dominating an argument. People nearby stopped talking and began filtering over to listen. A tight knot of men formed, grim-faced and serious, as Verrick and Moore waxed louder and hotter.

"Our problems are of our own making," Verrick asserted. "They're not real, like problems of supply and labour surplus. This M-game was invented by a couple of mathematicians during the early phase of the Final War."

"You mean discovered," Moore said. "They saw that social situations are analogues of strategy games, like poker. A system that works in a poker game will work in a social situation, like business or war."

"What's the difference between a game of chance and a strategy game?" Laura Davis asked, from where she and Al stood.

Annoyed, Moore snapped: "Everything! In a game of chance no deception is involved; in a poker game every player has a deliberate strategy of bluff, false leads, misleading signs."

Moore turned back to Verrick. "You want to deny that society operates like a strategy game? Minimax was a brilliant hypothesis. It gave us a rational, scientific method of cracking any strategy and transforming the strategy game into a chance game, where the regular statistical methods of the exact sciences function."

"All the same," Verrick rumbled, "this chance business deposes a man for no reason and elevates an ass, a crackpot, picked at random, without regard to ability or class."

"Our whole system is built on Minimax. Everybody is compelled to play a Minimax game or be squashed; we're forced to give up deception and adopt a rational procedure."

"There's nothing rational in chance," Verrick answered angrily.

"The chance factor is a function of an overall rational pattern. In the face of random changes, no administrator can be a schemer. Everybody is forced to adopt a randomized reasoning: analysis of the possibilities of certain events tempered by the assumption that any machinations will be found out in advance."

"So we're a bunch of superstitious fools?" Verrick complained. "Everybody trying to read signs and harbingers. Two-headed calves and flocks of white crows! Dependent on chance, we're losing control because we can't plan."

"How can you plan with telepaths around? They find out every move."

Verrick pointed to his great barrel chest. "There are no charms hanging round by neck. I play a game of skill, not chance. What about Pellig—that's strategy, isn't it?"

"Strategy involves deception and with Pellig nobody is going to be deceived."

"Absurd!" Verrick growled. "You've been knocking yourself out keeping the Corps from knowing about Pellig."

"That was your idea." Moore flushed angrily. "I said then, and I say now: let them all know because there's nothing they can do. If I had my way I'd announce it over television tomorrow."

"You fool," Verrick rasped, "you certainly would!"

"Pellig is unbeatable." Moore was furious at being humiliated in front of everybody. "We've combined the essence of Minimax. Taking the bottle twitch as my starting point I've evolved a———"

"Shut up, Moore," Verrick muttered, moving a few steps away; people hurriedly stepped aside for him. "This chance stuff has got to

go. You can't plan anything with it hanging over your head."

"That's why we have it!" Moore shouted after him.

"Then get rid of it."

"Minimax isn't something you turn on and off. It's like gravity; it's a law, a pragmatic law."

Benteley had moved over to listen. "You believe in natural law?" he asked.

"Who's this fellow?" Moore snarled, glaring furiously at Benteley. "What's his idea in butting in?"

Verrick swelled another foot taller. "This is Ted Benteley. Class eight-eight, same as you. We recently took him on."

Moore blanched. "Eight-eight! We don't need any more eight-eights!" His face became an ugly yellow. "Benteley? You're one of the Oiseau-Lyre throw-outs."

"That's right," Benteley said evenly. "And I came straight here."

"Why?"

"I'm interested in what you're doing."

"What I'm doing is none of your business!"

Verrick said hoarsely to Moore: "Shut up or get out. Benteley's working with you from now on, whether you like it or not."

"Nobody gets into the project but me!" Hatred, fear, and professional jealousy blazed on Moore's face. "If he can't hang on at a third-rate Hill like Oiseau-Lyre he isn't good enough to———"

"We'll see," Benteley said coolly. "I'm itching to get my hands on your notes and papers. I'll enjoy going over your work,"

"I want a drink," Verrick muttered.

Moore shot Benteley a last glance of resentment and then hurried after Verrick. Their voices trailed off as a door was slammed. The crowd of people shifted and began to murmur wearily and break apart.

With a shade of bitterness Eleanor said: "Well, there goes our host. Quite a party, wasn't it?"

Benteley's head had begun to ache. His eyes hurt from the glare of the overhead lights. A man pushing by had jabbed him hard in the ribs. Leaning against the wall, a young woman was removing her sandals and rubbing her red-nailed toes.

"What do you want?" Eleanor asked him.

"I want to leave."

She led him expertly through the drifting groups of people towards one of the exits—sipping her drink as she walked.

Herb Moore blocked their way. His face was a dark, unhealthy red. With him was the pale, silent Keith Pellig.

"Here you are," Moore muttered thickly, teetering unsteadily, his glass sloshing over. He slapped Pellig on the back. "This is the most

important person alive. Feast your eyes, Benteley."

Pellig said nothing. He gazed impassively at Benteley and Eleanor, his thin body relaxed and supple. There was almost no colour about him. His eyes, his hair, his skin, even his nails, were bleached and translucent.

Benteley put out his hand; Pellig shook it. His hand was cool and faintly moist.

Benteley gazed at Pellig with dulled fascination. There was something repellent about the listless, slender shape. A sexless, juiceless, hermaphroditic quality.

"You're not drinking," Benteley's voice rolled out.

Pellig shook his head.

"Why not? Have some *methane gale."* Benteley fumbled a glass from the tray of a passing MacMillan robot.

Benteley thrust the glass at Pellig. "Eat, drink and be merry. Tomorrow somebody, certainly not you, will die. Pellig, how does it feel to be a professional killer? You don't look like one. You don't look like anything at all, not even a man."

Eleanor tugged furiously at his arm. "Ted, Verrick's coming?"

"Let go!" Benteley broke loose and gazed at the vacant face of Keith Pellig. "Pellig, how will it feel to murder a man you've never seen, a man who never did anything to you? A harmless crank, accidentally in the way of a lot of big people..."

Moore interrupted in a mumble of resentment. "You mean to imply there's something wrong with Pellig?"

Verrick appeared from the side room, pushing people out of his way. "Moore, take Pellig out of here." He waved the group of people brusquely towards the double doors. "The party's over. Get going! You'll be contacted when you're needed."

Verrick started for the wide staircase, his shaggy head turned to one side. "I'm going to bed."

Balancing himself carefully, Benteley said clearly after him: "Look here, Verrick, why don't you murder Cartwright yourself? Eliminate the middle-man. More scientific."

Verrick snorted with unexpected laughter and kept on his way. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said over his shoulder. "Go home and get some sleep."

"I'm not going home," Benteley said stubbornly. "I came here to learn what the strategy is, and I'm staying until I learn it."

At the first step Verrick halted and turned. There was a queer look on his massive face.

Benteley closed his eyes and stood with his feet apart, balancing himself as the room tilted and shifted. When he looked again Verrick had gone up the stairs and Eleanor Stevens was pulling frantically at

his arm.

"You damn fool!" she shrilled. "What's the matter?"

She led him into a side room, closed the door, shakily lit a cigarette and stood puffing furiously. "Benteley, you're a lunatic."

"I'm drunk. This Callistoan beetle-juice..."

She pushed him down in a chair and paced in a jerky little circle in front of him, taut as a marionette on a wire.

Benteley gazed up at her without comprehension until she had hold of herself again and was dabbing miserably at her swollen eyes. "Can I do something?" he asked.

Eleanor found a decanter of cold water on a low table in the shadows. She emptied a shallow dish of sweets and filled it with water. Very rapidly she doused her face, hands and arms, then yanked down an embroidered cloth from the window and dried herself.

"Come on, Benteley," she muttered, "let's get out of here."

She started blindly from the room, and Benteley struggled to his feet and followed. Her slim shape glided like a phantom between the gloomy objects that made up Verrick's possessions, up dark stairs and round corners where immobile robot servants waited silently for instructions.

They came out on a deserted floor, draped in shadows and darkness. Eleanor waited for him to catch up with her. "I'm going to bed," she said bluntly. "You can come if you want to, or you can go home."

"I have no home." He followed her, down a corridor and past a series of half-closed doors. Lights showed here and there. He thought he recognized some voices—men's voices, mixed with sleepy, women's murmurs. Abruptly Eleanor vanished and he was alone.

He felt his way through a haze of shapes. Once he crashed violently against something. A hail of shattered objects cascaded upon him.

"What are you doing here?" a hard voice demanded. It was Herb Moore, somewhere close by. "Get out of here, you third-rate derelict! Class eight-eight? Don't make me laugh!"

Unnerved, confused by the taunting face, Benteley lashed out. The face crumpled. Then something slammed into him and he was bowled over. Choked and crushed by a rolling, slobbering mass, he fought his way upward, struggling to catch hold of something solid.

"Pipe down," Eleanor whispered. "Both of you!"

Benteley became inert. Beside him Moore puffed and panted and wiped at his bleeding face. "You'll be sorry you hit me. You don't know what I can do."

Stumbling, Benteley retreated in a panic. The next thing he knew was that he was sitting on something low, bending down and

fumbling for his shoes. His coat was lying on the floor in front of him and his shoes lay separated from each other by an expanse of rich carpet. There was no sound; the room was utterly silent and cold. In a corner a dim lamp flickered.

"Lock the door." Eleanor's voice came from nearby. "I think Moore's gone off his head. He's out there in the hall shambling round like a maniac."

Benteley found the door and tugged at its old-fashioned manual bolt. Eleanor was standing in the centre of the room, one leg pulled up, unlacing her sandals. As the man watched, awed and astonished, she kicked off her sandals, unzipped her slacks, and stepped from them. For a moment bare ankles gleamed in the light.

Then he was stumbling his way to her, and she was reaching for him.

Much later he awoke.

The room was deathly cold. Nothing stirred. No sound, no life. Through the open window grey morning light filtered, and a wind whipped icily round him.

Figures lay sprawled out, mixed with disordered clothing in heaps. He stumbled between outstretched limbs, half-covered arms, stark-white legs that shocked him. He distinguished Eleanor, lying against the wall, legs drawn up under her, breathing restlessly between half-parted lips. He wandered on—and stopped dead.

The grey light filtered over another face and figure—his old friend Al Davis, peaceful in the arms of his soundly sleeping wife.

A little further on were more persons, some snoring dully, one stirring into fitful wakefulness. Another groaned and groped feebly for some covering. Benteley's foot crushed a glass; a pool of dark liquid leaked out. Another face ahead was familiar. A man, dark-haired, good featured... .

His own face.

He stumbled against a door and found himself in a hall. Terror seized him and he began running blindly. Silently his bare feet carried him along carpeted corridors, endless and deserted, up noiseless flights of steps that never seemed to end. He blundered wildly around a corner and found himself caught in an alcove, a full-length mirror ahead of him, blocking his way.

A wavering figure hovered within the mirror. He gazed mutely at it, at the waxen hair, the vapid mouth and lips, the colourless eyes. Arms limp and boneless at its sides; a spineless, bleached thing that blinked vacantly back at him, without sound or motion.

He screamed—and the image winked out. He plunged on along the corridors, feet barely skimming the carpets. He felt nothing under him. He was rising, carried upward by his great terror, a screaming,

streaking thing that hurtled towards the high-domed roof above.

Arms out, he shot soundlessly through walls and panels, in and out of empty rooms, down deserted passages, a blinded, terrorized thing that flashed and wheeled in desperate efforts to escape.

With a crash he struck against a brick fireplace and fluttered down to the soft carpet. For a moment he lay bewildered, and then he was stumbling on, hurrying frantically, hands in front of his face.

Sounds ahead, and a glowing yellow light that filtered through a half-opened doorway. In a room a handful of men were sitting at a table covered with tapes and reports. An atronic bulb burned in the centre, a warm, unwavering miniature sun that pulled him hypnotically. Coffee cups, writers, men murmuring and poring over their work. One huge heavy-set man with massive, sloping shoulders.

"Verrick!" he shouted at the man. "Verrick, help me."

Reese Verrick glanced up angrily. "What do you want? I'm busy."

"Verrick!" he screamed, pulsing with terror. *"Who am I?"*

"You're Keith Pellig," Verrick answered irritably, wiping his forehead with one immense paw and pushing his tapes away. "You're the assassin picked by the Convention. You have to be ready to go to work in less than two hours."

Chapter VI

Groves continued working at his navigation table.

"Captain Groves, they're coming," Konklin said.

Groves nodded, and then returned to his navigation instruments.

The ship was now thirty astronomical units from the sun. Against the blackness of space bits of cold fire glowed, distant planets and suns wheeling silently round the creaking, lumbering ore freighter.

Down in the cargo hold fog lay over the dozing men and women. The warmth of the reactors had crept everywhere: the vibrating metal floor had become a surface of dull-glowing heat. Within the last few hours dust and water vapour had settled on flushed skins, on pots and pans, and was dripping from the walls to form warm pools.

Bruno Jereti sat running his horny fingers over the threads of a steel bolt. "I'm too old to get excited. If we're going back, that's all right with me."

Mary Uzich lay sprawled out resentfully among the bedding piled everywhere. "All those years of planning and working—and now we're giving up."

"We didn't know Cartwright was going to be Quizmaster." The old carpenter tossed the bolt aside. "I voted to go back myself."

"Then why did you join the Society? What the hell did you come along for, if you're going to back out now?"

Jereti picked up a pipe wrench and examined it intently. "I suppose you don't remember the burnings."

"Burnings! You mean all the books?"

"I mean the other burnings. My grandad used to take me down to watch about once a week. It was sort of a public event, like a park concert."

"What the hell's a park concert?" Mary felt sleepy and sick. The metallic dust choked her throat. "I wish the filter system worked better," she complained.

"I'm talking about the *things* they burned," Jereti continued. "Television sets and cars and mixers—that sort of stuff. Once a week they burned them. Billions of dollars worth. They had a burning place in the centre of every town. We used to watch the cars and toasters and clothes and oranges and coffee and cigarettes—every goddamn thing in the world—flare up promptly at noon on Saturdays."

"That doesn't sound like fun."

"It was against the law to snatch any of it. Nobody had the money to buy it, so it was burnt. That's when I decided to become a Prestonite." The pipe wrench came apart in his hands and he began reassembling it. "They tried all the ways they could to sell the

merchandise, but there was always too much of it."

"And the principle underlying all this made you cynical."

"The fault is with human nature; it's natural for one man to take advantage of another, if he can."

"Yet a little while ago you were willing to risk your life on this idealistic voyage in search of Flame Disc."

"A little while ago, but now *Cartwright is in,* and that means we're in, too. Maybe I shall get some of the things I used to see them burn."

"So you'll go back?"

"Well, perhaps. I'll have to think it over." Jereti grinned slyly. "The assassin might get Cartwright. I have to consider all the aspects."

The metallic clouds, the vibration, the half-visible shapes, made the cargo hold seem a wasteland of phantoms. Mary Uzich brooded unhappily; the Society and John Preston's planet had become totally unconvincing.

"Maybe we're making a mistake," she said. "I've always believed in Flame Disc. Since I was a kid and picked up one of his books I've thought how wonderful it would be if we could get away from *them.* But maybe we need them to lead us."

"Captain Groves won't let them turn the ship back," Janet Sibley mumbled. She wiped her eyes with her drenched handkerchief. "He has a cupboard full of guns up there."

Janet Sibley moaned wretchedly. "I hate that dirty old boarding-house——" Her misery welled up in an agonizing flood. "I just can't go back!"

"How long did you live there?" Mary asked her.

"Eighteen years."

"Eighteen years ago I was just learning to walk."

"You're young and attractive," Janet Sibley quavered. "You can go anywhere. You don't know what it's like to sit in a filthy little room, just sitting and waiting."

"When did you join the Society?"

"I've sent a little money to the Society as long as I can remember. But I never went to any of the meetings. They sent me pamphlets, and I studied Mr. Preston's books. Then one day Mr. Cartwright came to see me. He couldn't talk me into going to a meeting; I was too afraid. But later on Captain Groves came and talked to me, because he was club leader for the Hill area where I lived. So I came. That was three years ago. And then Mr. Cartwright instructed me the other day to bring my things and not say anything to anybody."

Janet Sibley ceased talking; Larry Thompson and Louise Tyler were listening.

Thompson gazed down at the old woman. His blue eyes were blank with shock, the eyes of a terrified boy suddenly faced with age

and death and poverty.

Louise reached up and brushed the boy's blond hair back. "What planet was it, Larry."

"They went to Ganymede."

"Would you like to tell me—what those altereds are like?"

He made a jerky gesture. "The air's thin. About like Mars. Huge bladder-lungs. Spindly little legs." He shuddered. "Everybody in my family went, but me. Better to be dead!"

"Suppose we had children after we reached the Disc? They wouldn't be like Earth children. We'd change, too. The Disc is going to create altereds."

Thompson's mouth twitched violently. "I wouldn't have children that were monsters. If I'd met you before this trip started——"

"You can't raise a family on Earth! There're no jobs, nothing. Why do you think people go to work-camps? Or to squatters' colonies? Spawning monsters—but at least they're alive."

"Have you ever seen them?"

"Yes, I've seen them. I'm older than you... I was married once before. Bob and I signed on for a work-camp on Venus. Bob got fungoid spores in his lungs the first week. He swelled up and split open in front of my eyes. I came back to Earth."

"I didn't know," Thompson said.

Louise indicated her neck. "You don't see any luck charms there, do you? I knew they don't help; they're not the answer."

Thompson grabbed hold of her shoulders. "Then what is?"

Louise pulled away from him. "You're bright. And you're young. Maybe you could pass one of the Quizzes, if you had help. Every year a few hundred young men like you win classifications. And Cartwright's Quizmaster now. That might help."

"How did you vote?" Thompson shouted at her. "Good God, did you vote to go back?"

"I didn't vote. I'm just waiting."

Ralf Butler nodded curtly, and Nat Gardner moved forward. Butler and Paul Flood stood together watching tensely. Behind them Jack McLean remained warily in the doorway of the control bubble.

"This won't take long, Captain," Gardner said shyly. He was grimy and sweaty, straight from the reactor chambers where he had been going over the pipes to the firing jets.

Groves laid down his navigation instruments and removed his glasses. "Well?" he demanded. "What do you want? You seem to be the spokesman."

Jack McLean spoke up, confident and unhampered. "Captain, we're heading back home."

There was silence. The baldness of the statement had shocked

everyone, including Butler. He glared angrily at McLean; the salesman shrugged and moved away.

"What's this about a vote?" Groves asked. "Konklin tells me you took some sort of vote and removed Cartwright. He tells me you replaced him with *that."* Groves indicated the sloppy, food-stained figure of Dr. Flood.

"Look at it this way, Captain," Gardner went on quickly, flushed and embarrassed. "There's no reason for this trip, now. Not with Cartwright as Quizmaster. Is there?" Gardner's voice was humble, pleading, and he glanced round nervously for support. "Cartwright didn't know he was going to become One."

"He knew before we took off," Groves said.

Gardner blinked uncertainly. "Let's get back to Earth where things are happening. We made Flood President of the Society, and his orders are to turn back."

"That's right," Flood said quietly, his pulpy fingers fiddling aimlessly with the lapel of his coat. "You're under orders to me, Groves."

Groves didn't respond. His massive face was thoughtful as he mulled over what Konklin had told him and what he had decided on his own. He said finally: "If you try to interfere with the course of the ship I'll lock you all up."

"If you don't turn back," Flood said, "we'll put somebody else up here."

"Who?" Groves challenged.

Butler answered, as Flood had momentarily floundered. "All we do is signal the base at Pluto for a patrol ship to grapple us down."

It was true, Groves realized. If he didn't turn the ship it would be in Verrick's hands in a matter of hours. He moved towards the door.

"Where're you going?" Flood demanded excitedly.

"To the hold. I want to know if a vote was really taken." Groves started along the corridor; the delegation streamed after him.

"Consider!" Flood gasped, "with Cartwright Quizmaster we can explore officially, and on a vast scale."

"If a Directorate finds the Disc," Groves pointed out, "it will belong to the Directorate and not to us." He halted at the entrance hatch of the cargo hold. "Konklin," he called.

Konklin pushed through the delegation.

Groves pondered, his face distorted in concentration. "I can take your word. Did they really take a vote?"

Konklin wanted to scream. Of course they hadn't taken a real vote! Only a faked, strong-arm vote, with a gun, knives and fists. He opened his mouth—but the muzzle of Butler's gun glinted. They were watching him: Butler, McLean, Flood, all with the same confident

look.

"That's right," Konklin croaked, courage leaking out of him. "They took a vote."

Groves nodded. "If the majority wants to turn back," he said slowly, "then maybe we ought to give this thing up."

Groves entered the cargo hold. Listless shapes were watching him. Silent and unmoving, they waited.

Groves said to Butler: "We'll return the way we came. We'll deal with the Directorate and no one else."

Butler said easily: "You can set her down at Batavia. We'll send no signals."

Groves turned to the waiting grey shapes. "Because of your vote we're going back. You're the Society; if the Society has made up its mind to go back, that's it."

One of the Japanese optical workers approached Captain Groves. He bowed and straightened up again.

"Captain," he said in a reedy tenor, "I suggest a vote be taken in your presence. The results Mr. Butler obtained——"

Butler smashed the Japanese in the face. The little man's spectacles broke and shattered and he slid back, a suddenly crumpled doll. Butler snatched out his gun and spun towards Groves. He fumbled wildly for the switch as Groves reached into his own leather jacket.

Aiming calmly, Groves shot Butler's head to fragments.

Groves then swung round to cover Nat Gardner. Dr. Flood crouched and fired wildly. Konklin came to life and kicked Flood in the groin. Flood, his face a sickly grey, retched violently.

"I was down in the reactors," Gardner said slowly. "He told me..." Anger suffused his features. "You son of a bitch!" he said thickly, and headed straight for McLean. McLean smashed at him with a length of pipe. All at once everyone was fighting desperately in a dusty inferno.

The women were screaming shrilly, milling back and forth and trying to drag their children and possessions to safety. For a moment the crazed shape of Janet Sibley emerged, a frenzied figure smashing at one of the Mexicans with a section of metal railing.

It was a long time before the fury began to die but gradually it spent itself. Finally the figures lay about the cargo hold, exhausted.

Jereti managed to struggle awkwardly to his feet. He hung to the wall, shuddering and plucking at his broken teeth.

"Butler's dead," Thompson said, his voice thin with horror. "He has no head." He began to giggle hysterically.

"Shut up!" Groves said sharply. "Anybody else dead?"

"I don't think so," Louise Tyler answered. "But a lot are hurt."

"The son of a bitch," Gardner repeated monotonously as he kicked

at the unconscious form of Jack McLean, "came down and told me they took a fair vote."

Doctor Flood was a frightened blob of quivering flesh, his gold-tooth smile a leer of pain. "It was all Butler's idea," he stammered as Konklin approached him. "I went along with him like everybody else."

"You want to resign your position?" Konklin asked.

Flood agreed eagerly. "It was all Butler's idea. I never———"

"We'd better put a guard on the transmitter," Groves said, "so that nobody can put through a call to Neptune."

He stood pondering a moment, then moved slowly out of the cargo hold. A few minutes later he was back in the control bubble.

Chapter VII

Eleanor stevens appeared from the hall. "Verrick, this isn't Keith Pellig. Get Moore down here and make him talk. He's trying to injure Benteley; they had a fight."

Verrick's eyes widened. "This is Benteley? That goddamn Moore has no sense; this'll foul up things."

Benteley was beginning to recover some sanity. "Can this be fixed?" he muttered.

"He was out cold," Eleanor said in clipped tones. She had pulled on her slacks and sandals and had thrown a coat over her shoulders. "Get one of the lab doctors in here."

Moore appeared, shaken and afraid. "There's no harm done. I jumped the gun a little, that's all."

Benteley retreated from Moore and examined his alien hands and face. "Verrick," his voice said, thin and empty, "help me."

Verrick said gruffly: "It'll be all right. Here's the doctor now."

Herb Moore fluttered a few paces away, afraid to come near Verrick. At the desk Eleanor wearily lit a cigarette and stood smoking as the doctor inserted a needle into Benteley's arm and squashed the bulb. As darkness surrounded him, Benteley heard Verrick's heavy voice:

"You should have killed him or let him alone; not this kind of stuff. You think he's going to forget?"

A long way off Eleanor Stevens was talking.

"You know, Reese doesn't really understand what Pellig is. Have you noticed that?"

"He doesn't understand any kind of theory." Moore's reply was sullen and resentful.

"Why should he, when he can hire bright young men to understand it for him?"

"I suppose you mean me."

"Why are you with Reese? You don't like him. You don't get along with him."

"He has money to invest in my kind of work. Look, I took MacMillan's papers, all that research he did on robots. What came of his work? Just witless hulks, glorified vacuum cleaners, dumb-waiters. All he wanted was something big and strong to lift things, so that the labouring classes could lie down and sleep. MacMillan was pro-humanity."

There was the sound of people stirring, getting up and walking, the clink of a glass.

"The mix-up was your fault."

"Benteley will keep. He'll be there for good old Keith Pellig."

"You're not going to go over the implementation, not in your condition."

Moore's voice was full of outrage. "He's mine, isn't he?"

"He belongs to the world," Eleanor replied icily. "You're so wrapped up in your chess games that you can't see the danger you're putting us in. Every hour gives that fanatic a better chance of survival. If you hadn't gone berserk Cartwright might already be dead."

It was evening.

Benteley stirred. He sat up, surprised to find himself strong and clear-headed. The room was in semi-darkness. A single light gleamed, a glowing dot that he identified as Eleanor's cigarette. Moore sat beside her, moody and remote. Eleanor stood up quickly and turned on a table lamp.

"What time is it?" Benteley asked.

"Eight-thirty." She came to the bed, hands in her pockets. "How are you feeling?"

He swung his legs shakily to the floor. They had wrapped him in a standard nightrobe; his clothes were no- where in sight. "I'm hungry," he said. Suddenly he clenched his fists and struck wildly at his face.

"It's you," Eleanor said.

Benteley's legs wobbled under him. "I'm glad of that. It really happened?"

"It happened. It'll happen again, too. But next time you'll be prepared. You, and twenty-three other bright young men."

"Where are my clothes? I'm getting out of here."

Moore got up quickly. "You can't walk out. You discovered what Pellig is—do you think Verrick would turn you loose?"

"You're violating the Challenge rules." Benteley found his clothes in a cupboard and spread them out on the bed. "You can send only one assassin at a time. This thing of yours is rigged up to look like one, but——" Benteley unfastened his nightrobe and tossed it away. "This Pellig is nothing but a synthetic. He's a vehicle, you're going to slam a dozen high-grade minds into and head it for Batavia. Cartwright will be dead, you'll incinerate the Pellig-thing, and nobody'll know. You'll pay off your minds and send them back to their work. Like me."

Moore was amused. "I wish we *could* do that. As a matter of fact, we gave it a try. We jammed three personalities into Pellig at once. The result was chaos. Each took off in a different direction."

"Has Pellig any personality of his own?" Benteley asked, as he dressed. "What happens when all the minds are out of him?"

"He becomes what we call *vegetable.* He doesn't die, but he

devolves to a primitive level of existence, a kind of twilight sleep."

"What kept him going last night at the party?"

"A bureaucrat from my lab. Pellig is a good medium: not too much distortion or refraction."

"When I was in it, I thought Pellig was there with me."

"I felt the same way," Eleanor agreed calmly. "The first time I tried it I thought there was a snake in my slacks. It's an illusion. When did you first feel it?"

"When I looked in the mirror."

"How do you think *I* felt? I don't think Moore should try women operators."

Moore resumed: "During the last few months we've tried dozens of people. Most of them crack. A couple of hours and they get a weird sort of claustrophobia. They want to get away, as Eleanor says, as if it's something slimy and dirty close to them." He shrugged. "I don't feel that way. I think he's beautiful."

"How many have you got?" Benteley asked.

"We've found a couple of dozen who can stand it. Your friend Davis is one. He has the right personality: placid, calm, easy-going."

Benteley tightened. "So this explains his new classification?"

"Everybody goes up a notch for this. You're in on it, according to Verrick. It's not as risky as it sounds. If something goes wrong, if they start popping at Pellig, whoever's in there at the moment will be withdrawn."

"So that's the method?" Benteley said, half to himself.

"Let's see them prove a Challenge violation," Moore said spiritedly. "There's nothing they can get us on. The law specifies one assassin at a time, chosen by public convention. Keith Pellig was chosen by public Convention, and there won't be more than one of him."

"I don't see what purpose it serves."

"You will," Eleanor said. "Moore has a long story that goes with it."

"After I've eaten," Benteley stipulated.

They walked slowly to the dining-room. There Benteley froze at the doorway; Pellig was sitting at Verrick's table, a glass of water at his bloodless lips.

"What's wrong?" Eleanor asked.

"Who's in it?"

Eleanor shrugged indifferently. "One of the lab technicians. We keep somebody in it all the time; the more familiar we are with it the better chance we'll have."

Benteley moved towards the far end, away from Pellig. The waxen pallor made him uncomfortable; it was like that of some insect

newly out of its shell, not yet hardened by the sun.

And then it came back to him.

"Listen!" he cried huskily. "There's something more."

Moore and Eleanor Stevens glanced sharply at each other.

"The flying! I left the ground." His voice rose fearfully. "Something happened to me. On and on, like a ghost. Until the fireplace." He rubbed his forehead, but there was no bump, no scar.

Of course not. It was another body.

"Explain," he demanded hoarsely, "what happened to me."

"Something to do with the lighter weight," Moore said. "The body's more efficient than a natural human body."

Benteley's face must have showed disbelief because Eleanor put in: "Pellig may have accepted a drug-cocktail before you entered the body."

Verrick's gruff voice interrupted them.

"Listen," he said to Benteley, "you said you wanted to know our strategy; here it is. Once a telepath locks minds with an assassin he has him. The Corps never lets the assassin break off. They know exactly what he's going to do as soon as he thinks of it. No scheming can work; he's analysed too frequently."

"That's why teeps forced us to take up Minimax," Moore confirmed. "You can't use strategy against telepaths, you have to act randomly."

"Assassins in the past," Verrick continued, "tried to find ways of making free decisions. Plimp helped them. Essentially, plimp is assassin-practice. The pocket boards turn up combinations by which any variety of decision can be made. The assassin threw on his board, read the number, and acted accordingly. The telepaths wouldn't know in advance what the board was going to show, any more than the assassin would. But that wasn't good enough. The assassin played this damned M-game but still he lost. He lost because the teeps were playing it, too, and there were eighty of them and only one of him. He got squeezed out statistically, except once in a while."

"Pellig is obviously the answer," Moore exclaimed. "We have twenty-four different minds. There'll be no contact between them. Each of the twenty-four sits in a different cubicle here at Chemie. Each is connected to the implementation machinery. At intervals we switch in a different mind—picked at random. Each mind has a fully developed strategy. But nobody knows which mind is coming up next, or when. Nobody knows which strategy, which pattern of action, is about to start. The telepaths won't know from one minute to the next what the Pellig body is going to do."

Benteley felt a chilly admiration for this ruthless technician.

Eleanor Stevens' flat was a series of attractive rooms in the living

quarters of the A.G. Chemie Hill. Benteley gazed around appreciatively as Eleanor closed the door and moved about turning on lights and straightening things. She lowered the translucent filter over the view-wall of the flat. The night sky with its cold stars, the glittering sparks and shapes that made up the Hill, dimmed and faded. Eleanor glanced at him sideways, a little embarrassed.

She again strolled round the room, hands deep in her pockets, suddenly thoughtful. "I never saw anything in being telepathic; it meant I had to be trained for the Corps. I have no classification. If Verrick drops me that's the end."

She gazed up at him pathetically. "I hate being alone. I get so frightened."

"You want to be alone but you're afraid," Benteley suggested.

"I don't want to be alone. I hate waking up in the morning and finding nobody near me. I hate coming home to an empty flat."

Benteley wandered over to the translucent view-wall and restored it to transparency. "The Hill looks pretty at night," he said, gazing moodily out. "You wouldn't know, to look at it now, what it really is."

Eleanor poured drinks and brought Benteley his. He sat sipping, Eleanor beside him on the couch. In the half-light the girl's crimson hair glowed and sparkled. She had drawn her legs up and under her. Resting against the man, her eyes closed, glass cupped in her red-tipped fingers, she asked softly: "Are you going to be one of us?"

Benteley was silent a moment. "Yes," he said finally. He leaned over and set down his glass on a low table. "I took an oath to Verrick, so I've no choice, unless I want to break that oath."

"It's been done before."

"I've never broken my oath. I got fed up with Oiseau-Lyre years ago but I never tried to get away. I accept the law that gives a protector the power of life and death over serfs, and I don't think an oath should be broken, by either serf or protector."

Eleanor put her glass aside and reached up to put her smooth bare arms round his neck. He touched the girl's soft, flame-red hair and held her tight against him for a long time. She stretched up to kiss him on the mouth, her warm, intense face vibrating against his for a moment. Then she sank back with a sigh. "It's going to be wonderful, working together—being together..."

Chapter VIII

Leon cartwright was eating breakfast with Rita O'Neill and Peter Wakeman when the ipvic relay operator notified him of a closed-circuit transmission from Groves.

"Sorry," Groves said, as the two of them faced each other across billions of miles of space. "I see it's morning there. You're still wearing your dressing-gown."

The image was bad; extreme distance made it waver and fade. Grove's features had a ghostly cast, as if the transmission was coming from a grave.

"We're forty astronomical units out," Groves began. Cartwright's haggard appearance was a shock to him, but he was not certain how much was due to the distortions of a long-distance relay transmission. "We'll start moving into uncharted space soon. I've already switched from the official navigation charts to Preston's material."

The ship had gone perhaps half-way. Flame Disc held an orbit of twice the radius vector of Pluto. The orbit of the ninth planet marked the limit of charting and exploration; beyond it lay an infinite waste about which little was known though much had been conjectured. In a short while the ship would pass the final signal buoys and leave the finite, familiar universe behind.

"How have things been going?" Cartwright asked.

"I had to kill Ralf Butler. And a lot of us are recovering in the infirmary. The ship will go on, now. We squashed that. But a number really want to go back. They know we're already leaving the known system. This is their last chance to jump ship; if they don't do it now they're stuck all the way to the end, whatever it may be."

"How many would jump ship if they could?"

"Perhaps ten."

"Can you go on without those ten?"

"Some would have been useful in setting up the actual colony." Grove's dark face showed the unhurried working of his mind. "I think we could manage."

Cartwright's hands twitched. "Where would they go? Back to Pluto? There's a Hill base on Pluto; they might tip off Verrick."

"We're billions of miles from Pluto. And the lifeboat has almost no thrust; they'd have to beat back our velocity to zero before they could even start moving. It'd take them weeks to cover the distance to the nearest possible patrol station."

Cartwright licked his dry lips. "How about the emergency ipvic in the boat?"

"It's been out of commission since we purchased it."

"Go ahead, then, if it won't jeopardize the ship."

Groves was worried, but not about the ship. "When we talked before, I didn't have a chance to congratulate you. I wish I could shake your hand, Leon." Groves held his hand to the ipvic screen; Cartwright did the same, and their fingers appeared to touch separated though they were by millions of miles of dust and heatless waste. Groves kept his worry from showing and with an effort managed to smile. "You people on Earth are used to your status by this time. But here we still look upon it as a miracle."

A muscle in Cartwright's cheek jerked spasmodically. "It still seems almost—dreamlike. A kind of nightmare I can't wake up from."

"Nightmare! You mean the assassin?"

"I'm sitting here waiting for him."

"Do you know any more about him?"

"My telepaths say the name of Keith Pellig has been in the minds of Verrick and his staff for months, but what it means..."

Groves went on: "If news comes that you're dead we'll drop out of sight. We'll cut our transmission to Batavia, perhaps even demolish the transmitter."

"I hope," Cartwright replied, "that when I'm killed you'll be in sight of the Disc." He moved away from the screen. "If you'll excuse me, Wakeman is briefing me on the Corps's strategy."

"Good luck," Groves said as he broke the transmission connection.

He called Konklin into the control bubble and unemotionally briefed him in a few words. "Cartwright agrees to let them jump ship. That takes care of them; it's the rest of us I'm worried about. I suppose you know the reactors are eating up fuel faster than we had expected? Efficiency is down almost to nil; if we have to spend a lot of time looking for the Disc..."

He had intended to continue: '... then we may never be able to get back to the known system.'

"I know what you're thinking," Konklin said. "It may be hard to find because it may not be there."

Inside Groves was a gnawing fear. They had come a long way; the area of charted space was far behind them. Suppose, after all this, there was really no tenth planet? "It's too late to change our minds now," he said aloud.

"Well," Konklin said, "we could *all* take off in the lifeboat... just an empty ship heading out..."

"At dinner I'll announce that anybody can jump who wants to."

Groves opened one of Preston's metal-bound log-books. "Do you know Preston's article on the origin of Flame Disc?" He summarized Preston's ancient words. "The Disc probably wasn't always one of Sol's. It may have come in only a few centuries ago, perhaps in Preston's

lifetime."

"Then you're not going to suggest there may be no Disc?"

Groves scowled. "Of course there's a Disc! We wouldn't have come this far otherwise."

But his fear remained.

* * *

For dinner a case of frozen pork was opened. It should have been the first meal on Flame Disc, the landing cele- bration. Watching the faces of the forty-odd men, women and children, Groves knew it had been a good idea to get non-protine food on the table.

"How long has it been since you ate real meat?" Konklin asked Mary Uzich.

"I've never had any real meat before," Mary said simply.

Groves sipped at a tin cup of brandy, his meal almost untouched. The others gradually finished and pushed their dishes away. The thick metallic dust in the air became darkened by the smoke of cigarettes.

"Is it true we've passed the final marker buoys?" Larry Thompson asked Groves.

"A few hours ago."

"Then we're actually beyond the known system."

"This is outside," Groves said, "because nobody expects to find anything here but wastes and monsters." He finished his brandy and pushed the cup away. "Gardner says the lifeboat is in good shape. It's loaded with supplies and signal equipment."

"What about navigation?" Louise Tyler asked. "You're the only one who knows navigation and you're not coming."

"The lifeboat is essentially an automatic guided missile. Once it's lined up with Neptune it'll find its way there."

"What happens after we get to Neptune?" Flood demanded.

"Supply ships reach the inner planets every ten days," Groves answered.

"What if one of the Hills patrols grabbed us on the supply ship?" McLean asked. "They might force us into work-camps."

"Maybe you're safer here," Konklin said. "Maybe going back isn't such a hot idea after all."

"I'm going back," Thompson said firmly. He forced himself not to look at Louise Tyler.

Groves made a note on a tablet beside his arm. "That's Thompson."

"Let me explain," Thompson pleaded. "Louise and

I are going to marry. We want our kids to grow up to be human

beings, not freaks. We want them to grow up on Earth."

Groves turned to Louise. "You're going back then?"

Louise nodded.

"I'm sticking," Jereti said.

Mary Uzich was astonished. "You're staying?"

"I can't stand Earth any more. Dirty people crowded together in slums; noise and filth..." He tapped his dish. "This meal has made me remember what I'm missing; I can't go back to protine."

"I'm staying," Janet Sibley whispered in an almost inaudible voice. Her eyes were fixed avidly on Captain Groves.

"I'm staying," Mary Uzich said, with a glance at Konklin.

Nat Gardner stirred restlessly. "I'm staying," he announced, and then flushed scarlet. "I have to make up for that." He gestured in embarrassment. "That son of a gun McLean. I want to make up, for having been a fool."

"I don't have to ask if you're going," Groves said to Paul Flood. "I'm not giving you any choice."

Flood grinned. Things were satisfactory. The ipvic-tap was in place, concealed within the transmitting antenna. Half the Society was turning back. The ship was short of fuel—and, most important, for a brief time he had been President. The score had been settled. He had shown Cartwright up for what he was.

Groves addressed the people round him. "Those who are leaving must collect their personal possessions and valuables."

Gardner slammed the hull-locks of the lifeboat and stood for a moment inspecting the jet flanges. A blur of pale, terrified faces gleamed from the window of the boat, and then Gardner signalled Captain Groves. The boat was dropped into the sphincter of the ship. It held for a short while as the atmosphere-envelope carefully sealed itself behind, and then all at once it fell like a stone into the empty void. Its jets came on with a furious splutter. Groves, in the control bubble of the ship, followed its course on his instrument board. The lifeboat hesitated, then very slowly began to fall behind as its sighting mechanism focused on the distant orb of Neptune.

Konklin lingered at the entrance of the bubble, not wanting to go into the deserted cargo hold. "The only people left are you, me, and the Japanese optical workers."

"It's not as bad as that," Groves said; he had opened his writing tablet and was studying a list. "We can use that old carpenter. I don't think the Sibley woman will be much use. It's good that Gardner stayed. The optical workers will come in handy when..."

Mary appeared at the entrance, white-faced and breathless. "They've left three children in the forward cabins! And there's all that stuff everybody left. We'll have plenty of protine when we land!"

After a moment Groves answered: "Plenty of food, clothing, raw plastics, machine tools, construction materials, wiring, pipe, boring equipment, medical supplies—everything but fuel."

"We won't need fuel," Mary said, surprised. "We won't leave again, will we?"

"We may have to search before we locate it," Groves admitted reluctantly.

"Is it true that the Hills have data about the Disc?" Konklin asked. "Good photographs that were never publicly released?"

"One hears that. The Hills are interested in *not* finding the Disc."

"The expedition of 'eighty-nine found nothing," Konklin pointed out. "And they had all Preston's data."

"Maybe what Preston saw was an extra large space serpent," Mary suggested wanly. "Maybe it'll devour us, like in the stories."

Groves eyed her stonily. "You two turn in and get some sleep."

Mary shivered. "It's like a tomb; down there in the cargo hold."

Mary threw herself wearily down on a bed and slipped off her sandals. "It's peaceful, here," she said to Konklin.

Konklin wandered moodily about. "I keep thinking of what's outside. The no-man's-land of space: it's all around us, out there. Coldness, silence, death... if not worse. It seemed a good idea, a tenth planet for everybody to migrate to, but now we're beginning to face the fact that it may not be true."

Konklin threw himself down on the cot beside her. "I never told you why I came, or why I joined the Society. You want to know?"

"If you want to tell me."

Konklin licked his lips. "I'm wanted by the Directorate police. I skipped out of a work-camp on Europa three years ago. The penalty for that is death. With four others I beat up a guard, stole a patrol ship and took off for Earth. We were shot down over North America. I was the only one who got out. I've been on the run since then."

"Does Groves know all this?"

"Both he and Cartwright know."

Mary reached out shyly and took his hand. "I think you'll be a good person for the colony." She pulled him close to her. "Even if we don't get there, this will be wonderful."

"This cell?"

She gazed up at him earnestly. "This is what I wanted when I was drifting aimlessly. I have a charm I made up to bring you to me; Janet Sibley helped me with it. I wanted you to love me."

Konklin smiled and leaned down to kiss her.

Abruptly, soundlessly, the girl winked out of existence.

A sheet of white flame filled the room; there was nothing else, only the glittering fire, a shimmering incandescence.

He stumbled and fell into the sea of light. He groped futilely for something to hang on to, but there was only the expanse of dazzling phosphorescence.

And then the voice began.

The sheer force of it stunned him. He sank down, bewildered and helpless, limp, inert. The voice thundered in this world of fire that had consumed him completely.

"Earth ship," it said, "where are you going? Why are you here?"

The sound thrilled through Konklin as he lay helplessly sprawled in the lake of foaming light.

"This is beyond your system," the voice went on. "You have gone outside. Do you understand that? This is the middle, space, the emptiness between your system and mine. Why have you come so far? What is it you are after?"

In the control bubble, Groves struggled desperately against the current of fury that swept over his body and mind. He crashed blindly against the navigation table and as instruments and charts rained down, the voice continued harshly.

"Fragile Earthmen, go back to your own system. Go back to your little orderly universe, your strict civilization. Stay away from regions you do not know! Stay away from darkness and monsters!"

Groves stumbled against the hatch. Groping feebly, he managed to creep from the bubble into the corridor. The voice came again, and seemed to impale him against the battered hull of the ship.

"You seek the tenth planet of your system, the legendary Flame Disc. Why do you seek it? What do you want with it?"

Groves shrieked in terror. He knew, now, what this was. *The Voices* prophesied in Preston's book. *The Voices that led.*

"Flame Disc is *our* world. Carried by us across space to this system. Set in motion here, to circle your sun for eternity. You have no right to it. What is your purpose?"

Groves tried to direct his thoughts outward. In an instant of time he tried to project all his hopes, plans, all the needs of the race, mankind's vast yearnings... .

The voice answered: "We will consider and analyse your thoughts _____"

Groves found the ipvic transmission room. He stumbled to the transmitter, a vague shape dancing beyond the rim of white fire. His fingers flung on the power: closed circuits locked automatically in place.

"Cartwright!" he gasped. Across the void the beamed signal speared its way to the Directorate monitor at Pluto and from there to Uranus. From planet to planet the thin signal went, relayed directly to the office at Batavia.

"Flame Disc was placed within your system for a reason," the great voice continued. It paused, as if consulting with companions. "Contact between our races might bring us to a new cultural level," it went on presently.

Groves huddled over the transmitter. He prayed feverishly that the signal was getting across, that back in Batavia Cartwright was hearing the booming voice he heard, and understanding the terrifying yet hope-giving words.

The voice continued: "We must know more about you. We do not decide quickly. As your ship is guided towards Flame Disc we will reach a decision; we will decide whether to destroy you or to lead you to safety on Flame Disc."

Reese Verrick accepted the ipvic technician's hurried call. "Come along," he snapped to Herb Moore. "We're cutting-in on Cartwright's ship. A transmission's coming across to Batavia, something important."

Seated before the vid-tap the ipvic technicians had set up for Chemie, Verrick and Moore gazed with incredulous amazement at the scene. Groves, a miniature figure lost in a rolling flame, was dwarfed to the size of an insect. From the aud speaker above the screen the booming voice, distorted and dimmed by millions of miles of space, thundered out:

"Our warning! If you attempt to ignore our friendly efforts to guide your ship, if you try to navigate on your own, then we cannot promise..."

"What is it?" Verrick croaked, blank-faced and dazed. "Is this really———"

"Shut up!" Moore grated. He peered hastily around. "You have a tape running on this?"

Verrick nodded, slack-jawed.

Moore examined the vid and aud tape recorders and then turned briskly to Verrick. "You think this is a supernatural manifestation?"

"It's from another civilization," Verrick quavered. "We've made contact with another race."

As soon as the transmission ceased, and the screen had faded into black silence, Moore snatched up the tapes and hurried them out of the Chemie buildings to the public Information Library.

Within an hour the analysis was in, from the main Quiz research organs in Geneva. Moore grabbed the report up and carried it to Reese Verrick.

"Look at this!" He slammed the report on Verrick's desk.

Verrick blinked. "What's it say? Is that voice——"

"That was John Preston." There was a peculiar expression on Moore's face. "He once recorded part of his *Unicorn;* the Information Library has it all down on aud, together with vid shots for us to

compare."

Verrick gaped foolishly. "I don't understand. Explain it to me."

"John Preston is out there. He's been waiting for that ship and now he's made contact with it. He'll lead it to the Disc."

"But Preston died a hundred and fifty years ago!"

Moore laughed sharply. "Get that crypt open as soon as possible and you'll understand. *John Preston is still alive."*

Chapter IX

The MacMillan robot moved languidly up and down the aisle collecting tickets. Overhead, the midsummer sun beat down and was reflected from the gleaming silver hull of the sleek rocket liner. Below, the vast blue of the Pacific Ocean lay sprawled out, an eternal surface of colour and light.

"It really looks nice," the straw-haired young man said to the pretty girl in the seat next to him. "The ocean, I mean. The way it mixes with the sky. Earth is about the most beautiful planet in the system."

The girl lowered her portable television lenses, blinked in the sudden glare of natural sunlight, and glanced in confusion out of the window. "Yes, it's nice," she admitted shyly.

She was a very young girl, eighteen at the most. Her hair was curly and short, a halo of dark orange—the latest colour style—round her slim neck and finely cut features. She blushed and returned hastily to her lenses.

"How far are you going?" the young man asked presently.

"To Peking. I have a job at the Soong Hill, I think. I mean, I got a notice for an interview." She fluttered with her purse. "Maybe you can look at it and tell me what all those legal phrases mean. Of course," she added quickly, "when I get to Batavia Walter can..."

"You're classified?"

"Class 11-76. It isn't much, but it helps."

Her companion studied her papers. "You're going to compete against three hundred other class 11-76 people," he said presently. "For every vacancy they call a couple of hundred trained personnel. They they call an additional hundred untrained novices, like yourself, who have the classification but no actual experience. That way they have three hundred together in one spot, so———" He dropped her papers back in her lap. "Then they start taking bids."

"Bids!"

"They don't call it bidding, of course. Those who have the experience see the position going for less money and privileges to someone like yourself. To them the hiring office stresses youth and willingness to learn. To your group the office stresses need of experience. Both groups get panicky. The hiring office strategy is to pit one against the other, each individual and each group."

"But why do they do all that?"

"The one they finally condescend to hire takes the position on any terms they're willing to dole out. That's how the Hills get classified persons to swear on for their entire lives, and on any terms the Hill

sets. Theoretically the skilled workers ought to be able to dictate to the Hills. But instead of being organized, they are pitted against each other."

"You sound so—cynical."

The young man laughed a thin, colourless laugh. "Maybe I am." He eyed the girl benignly. "What's your name?"

"Margaret Lloyd." She lowered her eyes shyly.

"My name's Keith Pellig," the young man said, and his voice was even thinner than before.

The girl thought about it a moment. "Keith Pellig?" For an instant her smooth forehead wrinkled unnaturally. "I think I've heard that name, haven't I?"

"You may have." Amusement was in the toneless voice.

"Where are you going?"

"Batavia."

"On business?"

"I'd call it business." Pellig smiled humourlessly. "When I've been there a while I may begin calling it pleasure. My attitude varies."

"You talk strangely," the girl said, puzzled and somewhat awed.

"I'm a strange person. Sometimes I hardly know what I'm going to do or say next. Sometimes I seem to be a stranger to myself. Sometimes what I do surprises me and I can't understand why I do it." Pellig stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. The smile had left his face and now he scowled, dark and troubled.

Peter Wakeman pushed the analysis across the breakfast table to Cartwright. "It really is Preston. It's no supernatural being from another system."

Rita O'Neill touched Cartwright's arm. "That's what he meant in the book. He planned to be there to guide us. The Voices."

Wakeman was deep in thought. "A few minutes before our call reached the Information Library another was received for an identical analysis."

Cartwright sat up with a jerk. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know. They say aud and vid tapes were rushed to them for analysis. Substantially the same material as we sent over, but they don't know who it was from."

"Can't you tell anything?" Rita O'Neill asked uneasily.

"First of all, they do know who sent in the prior information request. But they're not telling. I'm toying with the idea of sending a few Corpsmen over to scan the officials."

Cartwright waved his hand impatiently. "We have more important things to worry about. Any news on Pellig?"

Wakeman looked surprised. "Only that he's supposed to have left the Chemie Hill."

Cartwright's face twitched. "You haven't been able to make contact? Can't you go out and get him? Are you just going to sit and wait?"

In the few days since Cartwright had become Quizmaster there had been a corrosive change in him. He sat fumbling with his coffee cup, a hunched, aged, frightened man. His face was dark and lined with fatigue, and his pale blue eyes glinted with apprehension. Again and again he started to speak, then changed his mind and remained silent.

"Cartwright," Wakeman said softly, "you're in bad shape."

Cartwright glared at him. "A man's coming here to kill me, publicly and in broad daylight, with the approval of the system."

"It's only one man," Wakeman said quietly. "He has no more power than you. You have the whole Corps behind you, and all the resources of the Directorate. Each Quizmaster has had to face this." He raised an eyebrow. "I thought all you wanted was to stay alive until your ship was safe."

Cartwright smiled shakily, half-apologetically. "You've been dealing with assassins all your life. To me it's a new thing; I've been an nonentity. Now I'm chained here under a ten billion watt searchlight. A perfect target——" His voice rose. "And they're trying to kill me! *What are you going to do?"*

Wakeman thought to himself: 'He's falling apart; he doesn't care a damn about his ship.'

To Wakeman's mind Shaeffer's answering thoughts came. Shaeffer was at his desk on the other side of the Directorate building, acting as the link between Wakeman and the Corps. "This is the time to get him over there. I don't think Pellig is close, but in view of Verrick's sponsorship we should leave a wide margin for error."

Wakeman thought back: "At any other time Cartwright would have been overwhelmed to learn that John Preston is alive. Now he pays only little attention. And he can assume that his ship has reached its destination."

Wakeman turned to Cartwright and spoke to him aloud. "All right, Leon. Get ready, we're taking you out of here. We have plenty of time. No report on Pellig yet."

Cartwright blinked and then eyed him suspiciously. "Out where? I thought the protective chamber Verrick fixed up——"

"Verrick assumes you'll use that, so he'll try there first. We're taking you off Earth entirely. The Corps has arranged a retreat on Luna. While the Corps battles it out with Pellig you'll be 239,000 miles away."

Cartwright gazed helplessly at Rita O'Neill. "Shall I go?"

"Here at Batavia," Wakeman said, "ships land thousands of people

hourly; it is the functional centre of the nine planet system. But on Luna a human being literally stands out. You'll be surrounded by miles of bleak, airless space. If Keith Pellig should manage to trace you to Luna and come walking along in his bulky Parley suit, geiger counter, radar cone and helmet, I think we'll spot him."

Wakeman was trying to joke, but Cartwright didn't smile. "In other words, you can't defend me here."

Wakeman sighed. "We can defend you better if you're on Luna."

It was like talking to a child. Frightened, helpless, the old man had ceased to reason. Wakeman got to his feet and examined his watch. "Miss O'Neill will be coming along with you." He made his voice patient but firm. "So will I. Any time you want to come back to Earth, you can. But I suggest you see our layout there; make up your own mind afterwards."

Cartwright hesitated in an agony of doubt. "You say Verrick doesn't know about it? You're positive?"

"Better tell him we're sure." Shaeffer's thoughts came to Wakeman.

"We're positive," Wakeman said aloud, and it was a cold-blooded lie. To Shaeffer he thought: "Verrick *probably* knows. But it doesn't matter; if everything goes right Pellig will never get out of Batavia."

"And if he does?"

"It's your job to stop him. I'm not really worried, but I'd feel better if Verrick's Hills didn't hold the land on three sides of our Luna site."

Keith Pellig stood by Miss Lloyd as she seated herself in one of the liner's lounge chairs and folded her nervous hands together. He then sat down opposite her and glumly examined the ceiling. Miss Lloyd's cheeks burned. The nice-looking man was grim-faced and sullen; she repressed a desire to leap up and hurry downstairs to her seat.

Within the Pellig body, Ted Benteley was deep in stormy thought. While he was reflecting, the mechanism was switched. Instantly he was back at the A.G. Chemie labs.

It was a shock. He closed his eyes and hung on tight to the metal band that enclosed his body, a combination support and focus. On his ipvic-engineered vidscreen the scene he had just left glimmered brightly. The body cast a microwave sheet that bounced at close range and was relayed by ipvic along the control channel to Chemie in the form of a visual image. A miniature Margaret Lloyd was seated opposite a miniature Keith Pellig, in a microscopic lounge.

"Who's in the Pellig thing?" Benteley demanded shakily.

"Your friend Al Davis."

Benteley noted the position of a luminous switch button. "Which switch represents you?"

Moore ignored the question. "The switch will ignite your indicator

a split-second before you're actually arced across. If you keep your eyes open you'll have warning."

"In this game of musical chairs who gets left standing up?"

"The body's not going to be blasted. It's going to reach Cartwright and destroy him."

"Your lab is already constructing a second automaton," Benteley contradicted. "When this one is demolished you'll have the second ready to be named by the Challenge Convention."

"If something goes wrong the operator within Pellig will be jerked back here before the body perishes."

"Will you really be hooked into this rig?"

"I'll be hooked in exactly like you."

As Moore moved restlessly towards the exit lock, Benteley asked: "What happens to my real body while I'm over?"

"As soon as you're arced out this stuff goes into action." Moore indicated the machinery that filled the metal chamber. "All this keeps the body functioning: supplies air, tests blood pressure, heart rate, carries off wastes, feeds, supplies water—whatever is needed."

The exit lock slammed. Benteley was alone in the machinery-crammed cubicle.

Benteley caught a glimpse on the screen of the liner and his heart constricted. The ship was getting near the sprawling Indonesian Empire, the largest functioning aggregate of human beings in the nine-planet system.

The screen showed the passengers of the transport preparing to land. There was always this moment of tension as a sleek liner set itself down; then the sigh of relief as the reactors clicked off and the landing locks rumbled open.

Keith Pellig and Margaret Lloyd joined the slowly moving crowd that pushed down the ramp to the passenger level. Benteley glanced away from them, to the outline of the Directorate's Batavia buildings. The landing field was linked directly to the main building grounds; the position of Pellig was indicated by a moving spot of colour.

But no spot showed the position of the network of telepaths.

Wakeman arranged for the C-plus rocket to be brought to the surface from its locker. He poured himself a drink, gulped it hastily and then conferred with Shaeffer. "In half an hour Batavia will be a *cul de sac* for Pellig."

Shaeffer's hurried response came back to him: "We now have an inferential report on Pellig. He boarded a regular non-stop liner at Bremen. Passage to Java. He's on his way somewhere between here and Europe."

Wakeman hurried to Cartwright's private quarters. Cartwright was listlessly packing his things with the aid of Rita O'Neill. Rita was

pale and tense, but composed. She was going through aud reference tapes with a high-speed scanner, sorting those worth keeping. A slim, efficient figure with a lucky cat's foot dangling as she worked.

"Keep hold of that," Wakeman said to her, indicating the charm.

Rita glanced up. "Any news?"

"Pellig will be here any minute. Our own ship is almost ready."

Cartwright roused himself. "Look, I don't want to get caught out in space——"

Wakeman was astonished at the words, and at the thoughts he caught behind them. Naked fear had invaded the old man's mind. "The ship is the new experimental C-plus. We'll be there almost instantly. Nobody can stop a C-plus once it's in motion."

Cartwright grunted miserably and began pawing at his heap of shirts. "I'll do what you say, Wakeman. I trust you." He went on clumsily packing, but becoming stronger each moment was an urge to hurry into the reinforced inner office Verrick had constructed and lock himself in. Wakeman deliberately turned his mind from Cartwright's to Rita O'Neill's.

And got a shock. Hatred radiated from the girl's mind directly at him. He was taken aback by its suddenness; it hadn't been there a moment before.

Rita saw the expression on his face, and changed her thoughts. Quick, canny, she had sensed his awareness; now she was thinking of the aud tape humming in her ears as she operated the scanner.

"What is wrong?" he barked at her. "What's wrong?"

Rita said nothing, but her lips pressed together until they were white. Abruptly she turned and hurried from the room.

"I can tell you," Cartwright said hoarsely as he slammed at his battered suitcases. "She blames you for this."

"For what?"

Cartwright picked up his cases and moved slowly towards the door. "I'm her uncle and she's always seen me in authority. Now I'm mixed up in something I don't understand and I can't control. I have to rely on you." He moved aside to let Wakeman open the door. "I suppose I've changed, since I came here. She's disappointed, and she blames you."

The C-plus ship was up-ended on the emergency platform in the centre of the main building. As soon as Cartwright, his niece and the group of Corpsmen had entered the hull locks slid smoothly into place. The roof of the building rolled back and the bright noon sky blazed down.

Wakeman fastened Rita's belt and then his own. She said nothing to him but her hostility had melted a little. "We may black-out during the flight. The ship is robot-operated." Wakeman settled down in his

seat. Sensitive machinery moved and high-powered reactors screamed shrilly into life. He relaxed and drank in the sleek purr of the drive as it warmed. It was a beautiful ship; the first actually made from the original model and designs.

"You know how I feel," Rita O'Neill said to him abruptly. "You were scanning me."

"I know how you *felt. I* don't think you still feel that way."

"It's irrational to blame you. You're doing your job the best you can."

"I'm doing the right thing." He waited a moment. "Well? The ship's ready to take off."

Cartwright managed to nod. "I'm ready."

Wakeman considered briefly. "Any sign?" he thought to Shaeffer.

"Another passenger transport coming in," the rapid thought came back. "Entering scanning range any moment."

Pellig would arrive at Batavia; that was certain. He would search for Cartwright; that was also certain. The unknown was Pellig's detection and death. It could be assumed that if he escaped the telepath net he would locate the Lunar site. And if he located that... .

"There's no protection on Luna," Wakeman thought to Shaeffer. "We're giving up all positive defence once we take Cartwright there."

Shaeffer agreed. "But I think we'll get Pellig here at Batavia."

"We'll take the chance." Wakeman gave the signal and the ship moved. First the regular turbine thrust, then the furious lash of energy as the C-plus drive swung into life, sparked by the routine release of power. For a moment the ship hovered over the Directorate buildings, glowing and shimmering. Then the drive caught, and in an instant the ship hurtled from the surface in a flash of blinding speed that rolled black waves of unconsciousness over the people within.

As the darkness engulfed Peter Wakeman a vague satisfaction drifted through his dwindling mind. Keith Pellig would find nothing at Batavia. Nothing but his own death. The Corps's strategy was working out.

At the moment Wakeman's signal sent the glowing C-plus ship away from Batavia the regular liner rumbled to a slow halt at the space field and slid back its locks.

Keith Pellig walked eagerly down the metal ramp and into the sunlight, blinking and peering excitedly at his first view of the Directorate buildings.

Chapter X

At 5.30 a.m. the heavy construction rocket settled down in the centre of what had once been London. In front of it and behind it razor-sharp transports hissed to smooth landings and disgorged parties of armed guards. They quickly fanned out and took up positions to intercept stray Directorate police patrols.

Within a few moments the old building that was the offices of the Preston Society had been surrounded.

Reese Verrick stepped out and followed his construction workers to the side of the building. The air was chill and thin; buildings and streets were moist with night dampness, grey, silent structures with no sign of life.

"This is the place," the foreman said to Verrick. He indicated a courtyard strewn with rubble. "The monument is there."

Verrick raced up the littered path to the courtyard. Workmen were already tearing down the steel and plastic monument; the yellowed plastic cube which was John Preston's crypt had been yanked down and was resting on the concrete. Within the translucent crypt the dried-up shape had shifted slightly to one side; the face was obscured by an arm flung across the glasses and nose.

"So that's John Preston!" Verrick said.

The foreman squatted down to examine the seams of the crypt. "It's a vacuum-seal, of course. If we open it here it'll pulverize to dust particles."

"All right," Verrick agreed reluctantly. "Take the whole works to the labs. We'll open it there."

The work crews who had entered the building reappeared with armloads of pamphlets, tapes, records, endless boxes of documents and printing supplies. "The place is a storeroom," one of them said to the foreman. "They had junk heaped to the ceiling. There seems to be a false wall and some kind of subsurface meeting chamber. We're knocking the wall down."

Verrick wandered into the building and found himself in the front office; only the bare water-stained walls, peeling and dirty, remained. The office led to a yellow hall. Verrick headed down it, past a fly-specked photograph of John Preston still hanging among some rusty hooks. "Don't forget this," he said to his foreman.

Beyond the picture a section of wall had been torn away, disclosing a crude false passage running parallel to the hall. Workmen were swarming about, hunting for more concealed entrances.

Verrick folded his arms and studied the photograph. Preston had been a tiny, withered leaf of a creature with wrinkled ears in a tangle

of hair. Small, almost feminine, lips above a stubbled chin, not prominent but hard with determination. A crooked, lumpish nose (Preston was partly Jewish) surmounted an unsightly neck protruding from a food-stained shirt.

It was Preston's eyes that attracted Verrick. Two uncompromising, steel-sharp orbs that smouldered behind thick lenses. They glowered fiercely at Verrick; their alive-ness startled him. Even behind the dusty glass of the photograph the eyes seemed hot with fire and life and excitement.

Verrick turned away as the foreman announced:

"All loaded—the crypt, the stuff we found in the building, the snap-models of the layout..."

Verrick followed his foreman back to the ship and almost immediately they were on their way back to A.G. Chemie.

Herb Moore appeared as the yellowed cube was lowered to a lab table. "This is his crypt?" he asked as he began rubbing dirt from the translucent shield that covered John Preston's withered body. "Get this stuff off," he ordered.

"It's old," one of the technicians protested. "We'll have to work carefully or it'll turn to powder."

Moore grabbed a cutting tool and began severing the shield from its base.

The shield split, brittle and dry with age. Moore clawed it away and from the opened cube a cloud of musty air billowed out and swirls of dust danced in their faces and made them cough and pull back.

Round the work-table vidcameras ground away, making a permanent record of the procedure.

Moore impatiently signalled. Two technicians lifted the wizened body and held it at eye-level. Moore poked at the face with a pointed probe, then suddenly grabbed the right arm. It came off without resistance and Moore stood holding it foolishly.

The body was a plastic dummy.

"Imitation!" He threw the arm down violently.

Moore walked all around the dummy, saying nothing to Verrick until he had examined it from all sides. Finally he took hold of the hair and tugged. The skull-covering came off, disclosing a metal hemisphere. Moore tossed the wig to one of the robots and then turned his back on the exhibit.

"It looks exactly like the photograph," Verrick said admiringly as he stepped nearer to the table.

Moore laughed. "Naturally! The dummy was made first and then photographed. But it's probably about the way Preston looked." His eyes flickered. "*Looks,* I mean."

Eleanor Stevens detached herself from the watching group and approached the dummy cautiously. "You think he's still alive in his own body?" Eleanor asked. "That isn't possible!"

Moore didn't answer. He was staring at the dummy; he had picked up the arm again and was mechanically pulling loose the fingers one by one. The look on his face was nothing Eleanor had ever seen before.

Abruptly he shook himself and hurried to the door. "Pellig should be entering the defence network. I want to be part of things when that happens."

Verrick and Eleanor followed quickly after him, the dummy forgotten.

"This should be interesting," Verrick muttered as he hurried to his office. Expectation gleamed in his heavy face as he snapped on the screen the ipvic technicians had set up for him. With Eleanor standing nervously behind him he prepared himself for the sight of Keith Pellig stepping from the transport to the field at Batavia.

Keith Pellig took a deep breath of warm fresh air and then glanced round. The field was crowded. Hordes of Directorate bureaucrats and milling groups of passengers were waiting fussily for ships; a constant din of noise and furious activity; the roar of ships and loudspeakers; the rumble of surface vehicles.

Al Davis noted all this as he halted the Pellig body and waited for Miss Lloyd to catch up with him.

"There he is," she gasped, bright-eyed and entranced by the sights. She began waving frantically. "Walter!"

A thin-faced man in his middle forties was edging through the throng of people. He was a typical classified official of the Directorate, one of its vast army of desk men.

He waved to Miss Lloyd and called out, but his words were lost in the general uproar.

Davis had to keep moving; he had to get rid of the chattering girl and her middle-aged companion and move towards the Directorate buildings. Down his sleeve and into his right hand ran the slender wire that fed his thumb-gun. The first moment the Quizmaster appeared in front of him—a quick movement of his hand, thumb raised, a tide of lethal energy released...

At that moment he caught sight of the expression on Walter's face.

Al Davis blindly moved the Pellig body towards the street and the lines of surface cars. Walter was a telepath, of course. There had been a flash of recognition as he had caught Davis's thoughts during a brief run-through of his programme of assassination. A group of people separated them and the Pellig body sprawled against a railing. With

one bound Davis carried it over the railing.

He glanced back—Walter was not far behind him.

Davis strode on. He had to keep moving. Surface cars honked and roared; he ignored them.

Full realization was just beginning to hit him; any of the crowd might be a telepath. The word passed on, scanned from one mind to the next... The network was a chain ring; he had run up against the first link. He halted, then ducked into a shop. He dimly sensed rather than saw the group of figures quietly entering the entrance behind him. He ducked down, then dashed down an aisle between counters. What next? They were at both doors; he had trapped himself. He thought frantically, desperately. What next?

While he was trying to decide, a silent *whoosh* picked him up. He was back at A.G. Chemie. Before his eyes a miniature Pellig raced and darted on the microscopic screen; the next operator in the automaton's body was already working to solve the problem of escape. Davis sagged limply into a chair.

On the screen Keith Pellig burned through the plate-plastic window of the shop and floundered into the street. People screamed in horror. While everyone else raced about, the fat red-faced assistant stood as if turned to stone, his lips twitching, his body jerking. Suddenly he collapsed in a blubbery heap.

The scene shifted as Pellig escaped from the pack of people clustered in front of the store. The assistant was lost from sight. Al Davis was puzzled. Had Pellig destroyed him? Pellig turned a corner, hesitated, then disappeared into a theatre.

The theatre was dark and Pellig blundered in confusion: bad tactics Davis realized. The darkness wouldn't affect the pursuers, who depended not on sight but on telepathic contact.

The operator in Pellig now realized his mistake and sought an exit. But already vague shapes were moving in on him. He hesitated, then dashed into a lavatory. From here he burned his way through the wall with his thumb-gun and emerged into an alley. There he stood considering trying to make up his mind. The vast shape of the Directtorate building loomed ahead, a golden tower that caught the sunlight and sparkled it back. Pellig took a deep breath and started towards it at a relaxed trot... .

The body stumbled. A new operator, dazed with surprise, fought for control. The body smashed into a heap of garbage, struggled up, and then loped on. There were no visible pursuers. The body reached a busy street and hailed a taxi.

The cab roared off in the direction of the Directorate tower. Pellig relaxed against the cushions, and nonchalantly lit a cigarette. Calmly lounging in the back seat of a public taxi Keith Pellig sped towards the

Directorate offices, his thumb-gun resting loosely on his lap.

Major Shaeffer stood in front of his desk and bellowed with fright.

"It's not possible," drummed the disorganized thoughts of the Corpsman nearest to him.

"There must be a reason," Shaeffer managed to think back.

"We lost him." Incredulous, fearful, the thoughts dinned back and forth throughout the network. "Walter Remington picked him up as he stepped off the ship. He had him. And then——"

"You let him get away."

"Shaeffer, *he disappeared.* At the second station he ceased to exist."

"How?"

"I don't know. Remington passed him to Allison at the shop. The assassin began to run. Allison kept mental touch easily."

"The assassin must have raised a shield."

"There was no diminution. The entire personality was cut off instantly, not merely the thoughts."

Shaeffer cursed. "And Wakeman's on Luna. We can't use telepathy —I'll have to use the regular ipvic."

"Tell him something's terribly wrong. Tell him the assassin disappeared into thin air."

Shaeffer hurried to the transmission room. As he was jerking into life the closed-circuit to the Lunar resort a new flurry of transferred thoughts chilled him.

"I've picked him up!" came from an eager Corpswoman, relayed by the network from one point to another. "I've got him!"

"Where are you?" responded insistent calls from up and down the network. "Where is *he?"*

"Theatre. Near the clothing shop. Only a few feet from me; shall I go in? I can easily———"

The thought broke off.

Through the network radiated tortured, twisted, incoherent, gibbering psychosis.

"Cut her out of the network," Shaeffer commanded savagely, and the quivering frenzy faded. He collapsed in a chair and pounded his throbbing forehead. *What had happened?*

He managed to raise Peter Wakeman on the ipvic vidscreen. "Peter," he croaked, "we're beaten."

Wakeman jerked violently. "What do you mean? Cartwright isn't even there!"

Shaeffer struggled with an unfamiliar medium of expression. "We picked the assassin up, then we lost him. We picked him up later on— in another part of the city. Peter, *he got past three stations.* And he's still moving. How he——"

New thoughts from telepaths smashed at him with stunning force.

"I have him. But he's not——" Confusion and uncertainty. "But, Shaeffer, it isn't the same mind!"

"I have him!" The next station of the network, in excitement and jubilation. "His taxi is directly behind my own, heading directly for the main building."

"Kill him!" Shaeffer shuddered.

"I'm stopping my cab. I'll kill him as he tries to pass. His driver is drawing level with me. He's only yards away; I got him full-blast."

The mind sending the message screamed.

Shaeffer clapped his hands to his head and closed his eyes. Gradually the storm died. Mind after mind was smashed, short-circuited, blacked-out by the overload, by the shattering pain that lashed through the entire web of telepaths.

"Where is he?" Shaeffer shouted. "What happened?"

The next station responded faintly. "He lost him. He's dropped from the network. He's dead, I think. Burned-out. I'm in the area but I can't catch the mind he was scanning. The mind he was scanning is gone!"

On the vidscreen Peter Wakeman's image tried hopelessly to gain Shaeffer's attention. Shaeffer was like a corpse, face dead and blank, all energy concentrated on the invisible struggle going on up and down the web-strands of the network.

"Listen to me," Wakeman commanded. "Once you get hold of his mind, *stay with him.* Follow him until the next station takes over. Maybe you're too far apart. Maybe———"

"I've got him," a thought came to Shaeffer. "I'll find him; he's close by."

The network quivered with excitement and suspense.

"I'm getting something strange." Doubt mixed with curiosity, then startled disbelief. "There must be more than one assassin. Yet that's not possible." Growing excitement. "I can actually see Pellig. He's going to enter the Directorate building by the main entrance; it's all there in his mind. Now he's thinking of crossing the street and going ———"

Nothing.

Shaeffer waited. Still nothing came. "Did you kill him? Is he dead?"

"He's gone!" the thought came, hysterical and giggling. "He's standing in front of me and at the same time he's gone. He's here and he isn't here."

The telepath dribbled off in infantile mutterings, and Shaeffer dropped him from the network. It didn't make sense. Keith Pellig was standing face to face with a Corpsman, within easy killing-distance—yet Keith Pellig had vanished.

Verrick turned to Eleanor Stevens. "It's working better than we had calculated."

"Corps members depend on telepathic rapport. They hang on by mental contact, and if that's broken——" The girl's face was stricken. "Reese, I think you're driving them insane."

Verrick got up and moved away from the screen. "You watch for a while."

Eleanor shuddered. "I don't want to see it."

A buzzer sounded on the man's desk. "List of flights out of Batavia," a monitor told him. "Total count of time and destination for the last hour. Special note of unusual flights."

Verrick accepted the metalfoil sheet and dropped it into the litter heaped on his desk as he hoarsely said to Eleanor: "It won't be long."

His hands in his pockets, Keith Pellig was striding up the marble stairs leading to the main entrance of the central Directorate building at Batavia... directly towards Leon Cartwright's suite of offices.

Chapter XI

Peter wakeman had made a mistake.

He sat for a long time letting this realization seep over him. With shaking fingers he got a bottle from his luggage and poured himself a drink. There was a scum of dried-up protine in the glass. He threw the whole thing into a disposal slot and sat sipping from the bottle. Then he got to his feet and entered the lift to the top floor of the Luna resort.

Corpsmen were relaxing in a tank of sparkling blue water. Above them a dome of transparent plastic kept the fresh spring-scented air in, and the bleak void of the landscape out. Laughter, the splash of lithe bodies, the flutter of colour, the texture of bare flesh, blurred past him as he crossed the deck.

Rita O'Neill was sun-bathing a little way beyond the main group of people. Her sleek body gleamed moistly in the hot light. When she saw Wakeman she sat up quickly, her black hair cascading down to her tanned shoulders and back.

"Is everything all right?" she asked.

Wakeman threw himself down in a deck chair. "I was talking to Shaeffer," he said, "back at Batavia."

Rita took a brush and began stroking out her cloud of hair. "What did he have to say?" she asked, as casually as she could. Her eyes were serious.

Wakeman allowed the warmth to lull him to silence. Not far off, the crowd of frolicking bathers splashed and laughed and played games. A shimmering water-ball lifted itself up and hung like a sphere before it plunged down into the grip of a Corpsman. Against her towel, Rita's body was a dazzling shape of brown and black, supple lines of flesh moulded firmly into the charm of youth.

"They can't stop him," Wakeman said at last. "He'll be here not long from now. My calculations were wrong."

Rita's eyes widened. She stopped brushing, then started again, slowly and methodically. "Does he know Leon is here?"

"Not yet. But it's only a question of time."

"And we can't defend him here?"

"We can try. Perhaps I can find out what went wrong. I may get more information about Keith Pellig."

"Will you take Leon somewhere else?"

"This is as good a place as any. At least there aren't many minds to blur scanning." Wakeman got stiffly to his feet; he felt old and his bones ached. "I'm going downstairs and go over the tapes we scanned on Herb Moore—those we got the day he came to talk to Cartwright."

Rita slipped on a robe, tied a sash around her slim waist and dug her feet into boots. "How long before he gets here?"

"We should start getting ready. Things are moving fast."

"I hope you can do something." Rita's voice was calm, emotionless. "Leon's resting. I made him lie down."

Wakeman lingered. "I did what I thought was right, but I must have forgotten something. We're fighting something much more cunning than we realized."

"You should have let Leon run things," Rita said. "You took the initiative out of his hands. Like Verrick and the rest of them, you never believed he could manage. You treated him like a child, and he gave up and believed it himself."

"I'll stop Pellig," Wakeman said quietly, "before he gets to your uncle. It's not Verrick who's running things—he could never work anything like this. It must be Moore."

"It's too bad," Rita said, "that Moore isn't on our side."

"I'll stop him," Wakeman repeated. "Somehow."

Rita disappeared down a ramp leading to Cartwright's private quarters. She didn't look back.

Keith Pellig climbed the stairs of the Directorate building with confidence. He walked swiftly, keeping up with the fast-moving crowd of classified bureaucrats pushing into the lifts, passages and offices. In the main lobby he halted to get his bearings.

In a thunderous din alarm bells sounded throughout the building. The milling of officials and visitors abruptly ceased. Faces lost their friendly lines and in an instant the easy-going crowd was transformed into a suspicious, anxious mass. From concealed speakers harsh mechanical voices proclaimed:

"Everyone must leave the building!" The voices shrilled up deafeningly. "The assassin is in the building."

Pellig lost himself in the swirling waves of men and women. He edged, darted, pushed his way into the interior of the mass, towards the labyrinth of passages that led from the central lobby.

A scream—someone had recognized him. A blackened, burned-out patch as guns were fired in panic. Pellig escaped and continued circling warily, keeping in constant motion.

"The assassin is in the main lobby!" the mechanical voices blared. "Concentrate on the main lobby."

"There he is!" a man shouted. Others took up the roar "That's him, there!"

On the roof of the building the first wing of military transports was settling down. Soldiers poured out and began descending in lifts. Heavy weapons and equipment appeared, dragged to lifts or grappled over the side to the ground.

At his screen, Reese Verrick pulled away briefly and said to Eleanor Stevens: "They're moving in non-telepaths. Does that mean ——"

"It means that the Corps has been knocked out," Eleanor answered.

"Then they'll track Pellig visually. That'll cut down the value of our telepathic machinery."

"The assassin is in the lobby!" the mechanical voices roared above the din. Soldiers threw plastic cable spun from projectors in an intricate web across corridors. The excited officials were herded towards the main exit. Outside, more soldiers were setting up a cordon of men and guns.

But Pellig wasn't coming out. He started back once—and at that moment the red button jumped, and Pellig changed his mind.

The next operator was eager and ready. He had everything worked out the moment he entered the synthetic body. Down a side corridor he sprinted, easily clearing an abandoned gun wedged in the passage.

"The assassin has left the lobby!" the mechanical voices bawled.

Troops poured after Pellig as he raced down corridors, cleared of officials and workers, but Pellig thumb-burned his way through a wall and into the main reception lounge, now empty and silent. The synthetic body skimmed from office to office, a weaving darting thing that burned a path ahead. The last office fell behind and Pellig stood before the sealed tank that was the Quizmaster's inner fortress. He recoiled as his thumb-gun showered harmlessly against the thick rexeroid surface.

"The assassin is in the inner office!" mechanical voices dinned. "Surround and destroy him!"

Pellig raced in an uncertain circle—and again the red button shone.

The new operator staggered, crashed against a desk, pulled the synthetic body quickly to its feet, and then began to burn his way to the side of the rexeroid tank.

In his office, Verrick rubbed his hands with satisfaction. "Now it won't be long! Is that Moore operating?"

"No," Eleanor said, examining the indicator board. "One of his staff."

The synthetic body emitted a supersonic blast. A section of the rexeroid tank slid away, and the concealed passage lay open. The body hurried up the passage without hesitation. Under its feet gas capsules popped uselessly. The body did not breathe.

Verrick laughed like an excited child. "They can't stop him! He's *in!"* He leaped up and down and pounded his fists on his knees. "Now

he'll kill him. Now!"

The rexeroid tank, the massive inner fortress with its armoury of guns and ipvic equipment, was empty.

Verrick squealed a high-pitched, frenzied curse. "He's not there! He's gone! They got him away!"

At his own screen Herb Moore convulsively jerked controls and lights, indicators, meters and dials, flashed wildly. Meanwhile, the Pellig body stood rooted in the deserted chamber. There was the heavy desk Cartwright should have been sitting at but he wasn't there.

"Keep him looking!" Verrick shouted. "Cartwright must be somewhere!"

The sound of Verrick's voice grated in Moore's aud phones. On the screen, his technician had started the body into uncertain activity. The schematic showed Pellig's location dot at the very core of the Directorate; the assassin had arrived but there was no quarry.

"It was a trap!" Verrick shouted in Moore's ear. "Now they're going to destroy him!"

On all sides of the demolished armoured chamber troops were in motion, Directorate resources responding to Shaeffer's hurried instructions.

Eleanor leaned close to Verrick's hunched shoulders. "They deliberately let him get in. Now—they're coming for him."

"Keep him moving!" Verrick shouted. "They'll burn him to ashes if he simply stands there!"

Pellig floundered in confusion. He raced along the passage and out of the chamber, then sped from door to door like a trapped animal. Once he halted to burn down a gun that had ventured too close and was taking aim. The gun dissolved and Pellig sprinted past its smoking ruin, but behind it the corridor was jammed with troops. He gave up and scurried back.

Herb Moore snapped a sentence to Verrick: "They took Cartwright out of Batavia."

"Look for him!"

"He's not there." Moore thought quickly. "Transfer to me your analysis of ship-movements from Batavia. We know he was there up to an hour ago. Hurry!"

The metalfoil rolled from its slot by Moore's hand. He snatched it up and scanned the entries. "He's on Luna," Moore decided. "They took him off in, their C-plus ship."

Moore slammed home a switch; buttons leaped excitedly. Moore's body sagged limply.

At his own screen Ted Benteley saw the Pellig body jump and stiffen. A new operator had entered it; above Benteley the red button had moved on.

The new operator wasted no time. He burned down a handful of troops and then a section of wall, fusing the steel and plastic together in a molten mass. Through the rent the synthetic body skimmed, a projectile plunging in an arcing trajectory. A moment later it emerged from the building and, still gaining velocity, hurtled straight upward at the dull disc of the moon.

Below Pellig Earth fell away. He was moving out into free space.

Benteley sat paralyzed at his screen. Suddenly everything made sense. As he watched the body race through darkening skies that lost their blue colour and gained pinpoints of unwinking stars, he understood what had happened to him. It had been no dream. The body was a miniature ship, equipped in Moore's reactor labs. And he realized with a rush of admiration that the body needed no air, that it didn't respond to extreme temperature. It was capable of inter-planetary flight.

It was doing that now.

Peter Wakeman received the ipvic call from Shaeffer within a few seconds of the time when Pellig left Earth. "He's gone," Shaeffer muttered. "He took off like a meteor."

"Heading where?" Wakeman demanded.

"Towards Luna." Shaeffer's face suddenly collapsed.

"We gave up. We called in regular troops. The Corps couldn't do a thing."

"Then I can expect him any moment."

Wakeman broke the connection and returned to his tapes and reports. His desk was a chaos of cigarette butts, coffee cups, and an unfinished drink. Now there was no doubt: Keith Pellig was not a human being. He was clearly a robot combined with high-velocity reactor equipment, designed in Moore's experimental labs. But that didn't explain the shifting personality that had demoralized the Corpsmen. Unless——"

Some kind of multiple mind came and went. A fractured personality artificially segmented into unattached complexes, each with its own drives, characteristics and strategy. Shaeffer had been right to call in regular non-telepathic troops.

Wakeman lit a cigarette and aimlessly spun his good-luck charm until it tugged loose from his hand and banged into the tapes stacked on his work-desk. *He almost had it.* If he had more time, a few days to work the thing out... He got up suddenly and headed for a supply locker. "Here's the situation," he thought to the Corpsmen scattered around. "The assassin has survived our Batavia network. He's on his way to Luna."

He radiated what he had learned about Pellig and what he believed. The answering thoughts came back instantly.

"A robot?"

"A multiple-personality synthetic?"

"Then we can't go by mind-touch. We'll have to lock on physical-visual appearance."

"You can catch murder-thoughts," Wakeman disagreed, as he buckled on a protective suit. "But don't expect continuity. The thought-processes will cut off without warning. Be prepared for the impact; that's what destroyed the Corps at Batavia."

"Does each separate complex bring a new strategy?"

"Apparently. Find him and kill him. As soon as you catch the murder-thought burn him to ash."

Wakeman poured himself a drink. He locked his helmet in place, snapped on the air-temp feed lines, collected a gun and hurried to one of the exit sphincters.

The arid, barren expanse of waste was a shock. He stood fumbling with his humidity and gravity control, adjusting himself to the sight of an infinity of dead matter. The moon was a ravaged, blasted plain of gaping craters where the original meteors had smashed away the life of the satellite. Nothing stirred, no wind or flutter of life. Whereever he looked there was only the pocked expanse of rubble. The face of the moon had dried up and split. The skin had been eroded; only the skull was left, and as Wakeman stepped gingerly forward he felt that he was tramping over the features of a death's head.

While Wakeman was hurrying across the deserted landscape someone's thoughts were jubilantly hammered into his brain. "Peter, I've spotted him! He landed just now, a quarter of a mile from me!"

The Corpsman was excitedly voluble. "He landed like a meteor. I saw a flash—I went to investigate——"

So Keith Pellig was that close to his prey? Wakeman cut his gravity-pressure to minimum and rushed forward wildly. In leaps and bounds he dashed towards his fellow Corpsman; panting, gasping for breath, he moved nearer the assassin.

He stumbled and pitched on his face. As he struggled up the hiss of escaping air whined in his ears. With one hand he dragged out the emergency repair pack; with the other he fumbled for his gun. He had dropped it somewhere in the debris around him.

The air was going fast. He forgot the gun and concentrated on patching his protective suit. The plastic hardened instantly, and the terrifying hiss ended. As he began searching for the weapon among the boulders and dust a Corpsman's thought was transmitted to him.

"He's moving! He's heading towards the right place!"

"Where are you?" He set off at a bounding trot in the direction of the Corpsman. A high ridge rose ahead of him; he sprinted up it and half-slid, half-rolled down the far-side. A vast bowl stretched out in

front of him. The Corps- man's thoughts came to him strongly now. He was close by.

And for the first time he caught the thoughts of the assassin.

Wakeman stopped, rigid. "That's not Pellig!" he radiated back wildly. "That's Herb Moore!"

Moore's mind pulsed with frenzied activity. Unaware that he had been detected, he had let down all barriers. His eager, high-powered thoughts poured out in a flood.

Wakeman stood frozen, concentrating on the stream of mental energy lapping at him. It was all there, the whole story. Moore's super-charged mind contained every fragment of it.

A variety of human minds. Altering personalities hooked to an intricate switch-mechanism. Coming and going in chance formation, without pattern. Minimax, randomness, M-game theory...

It was a lie.

Wakeman recoiled. Beneath the surface of game-theory was another level, a submarginal syndrome of hate and desire and terrible fear. Jealousy of Benteley. Terror of death. Moore was a driven man, dominated by the torment of dissatisfaction, culminating in ruthless cunning.

The twitch of the Pellig machinery wasn't random.

Moore had complete control. He could switch operators into and out of the body at any time; he could set up any combination he pleased; he was free to hook and unhook himself at will.

Moore spotted the Corpsman trailing him. The Pellig body shot quickly upward, poised, then rained a thin stream of death down on the scurrying telepath. The man shrieked once, then his physical being dissolved in a heap of ash. Like a cloud of volatile gas his mind hung together, then showly began to scatter. Its weak thoughts faded. The man's consciousness, his being, dissolved; the mind ceased to be a unit; the man was dead.

Wakeman cursed his lost gun. He cursed himself and Cartwright and everybody in the system. He threw himself behind a bleak boulder and lay crouched as Pellig drifted slowly down and landed lightly on the dead surface. Pellig glanced about him, seemed satisfied and began a cautious prowl.

"Get him!" Wakeman radiated desperately. "He's almost ours!"

There was no response; no Corpsmen were close enough to pick up and relay his thoughts. With the death of the nearest Corpsman the network had shattered. Pellig was walking through an undefended gap.

Wakeman leaped to his feet. He lugged an immense boulder waist-high and staggered to the top of the inclined rise. Below him Keith Pellig walked, bland, almost smiling. Wakeman managed to

raise the rock above his head. He swayed, lifted it higher—and hurled it, bouncing and crashing, at the synthetic.

Pellig saw the rock coming. He scrambled away in a spring that carried him yards from the path of the boulder. From his mind came a blast of fear and surprise, of panic. He raised his thumb-gun towards Wakeman.

And then Herb Moore had gone from the body.

The Pellig body altered subtly. Wakeman's blood froze at the uncanny sight; a man was changing before his eyes. The features shifted, melted momentarily, then reformed. But it wasn't the same face—because it wasn't the same man. Moore had gone and a new operator had taken over. From the pale blue eyes a different personality peered.

"Wakeman!" the thoughts came. "Peter Wakeman!"

Wakeman straightened up. The new operator had recognized him. Wakeman probed quickly and deeply. For a moment he couldn't place the personality; it was familiar but obscured by the immediacy of the situation. But he knew it, all right.

It was Ted Benteley.

Chapter XII

Out in dead space, beyond the known system, the creaking ore carrier lumbered along. In the control bubble Groves sat listening intently, his dark face rapt.

"The Disc is still far away," the voice murmured in his mind. "Don't lose contact with my own ship."

"You're John Preston," Groves said softly.

"I am very old," the voice replied. "I have been here a long time."

"A century and a half," Groves said.

"I have waited. I knew you would come. My ship will hover nearby; you will probably pick up its mass from time to time. If everything goes correctly I'll be able to guide you to a landing point on the Disc."

"Will you be there?" Groves asked. "Will you meet us?"

There was no answer.

He got unsteadily to his feet and called Konklin. A moment later both Konklin and Mary Uzich hurried into the control bubble. Jereti loped a few paces behind. "You heard him?" Groves said thickly.

"It was Preston," Mary whispered.

"He must be as old as hell," Konklin said. "A little old man, waiting out here in space for us to come. Waiting all these years..."

"I think we'll get there," Groves said. "Even if they managed to kill Cartwright we'll still reach the Disc."

"What did Cartwright say?" Jereti asked Groves. "Did it perk him up to hear about Preston?"

Groves hesitated. "Cartwright was preoccupied."

"But surely he———"

"He's about to be murdered!" Groves savagely flicked the controls. "He hasn't time to think about anything else."

Nobody said anything for a while. Finally Konklin asked: "Has there been any news?"

"I can't get Batavia. Military black-out has completely screened out the ipvic lines. I picked up emergency troop movements from the inner planets towards Earth, and Directorate wings heading home."

"What's that mean?" Jereti asked.

"Pellig has reached Batavia. And something has gone wrong. Cartwright must have his back to the wall. The Corps must have failed."

Wakeman shouted frantically. "Benteley! Listen! Moore has it rigged; you're being tricked. *It's not random.*"

It was hopeless. Without atmosphere his voice died in his helmet. Benteley's thoughts radiated to him clear and distinct but there was no

way in which Wakeman could communicate back. He was boxed-in, baffled. The figure of Keith Pellig and the mind of Ted Benteley were only a few yards from him—but he could make no contact.

Benteley's thoughts were mixed. It's Peter Wakeman, he was thinking. Realization of danger; an image of Cartwright; the job of killing; aversion and doubt; distrust of Verrick; dislike of Herb Moore. Benteley was undecided. For an instant the thumb-gun wavered.

Wakeman scrambled down the ridge and on to the plain. Frantically he scrawled on in the ancient dust:

MOORE TRICKED YOU. NOT RANDOM

Benteley realized that a one-sided conversation was going on with himself as transmitter and the telepath as receiver. "Go on, Wakeman," Benteley radiated harshly. "What do you mean?"

Wakeman wrote desperately.

MOORE WILL KILL BOTH YOU AND CARTWRIGHT

Benteley's mind radiated amazement, suspicion. His thumb-gun came quickly up... bomb

Wakeman, panting for breath, sought a new surface on which to write. But he had written enough. Benteley was filling in the details himself—his fight with Moore, his relations with Eleanor Stevens. Moore's jealousy. The thumb-gun was lowered.

"They're seeing this," Benteley thought. "All the operators at their screens. And Moore—he's seeing it, too."

Wakeman leaped up and ran forward. Gesturing excitedly, trying to shout across the airless void, he got within two feet before Benteley halted him by an ominous wave of the thumb-gun.

"Stay away from me," was the thought Benteley radiated. "I'm still not sure of you. You're working for Cartwright."

Again Wakeman scratched frantically:

PELLIG SET TO DETONATE WHEN CLOSE TO CARTWRIGHT. MOORE WILL SWITCH YOU INTO PELLIG BODY AT THAT MOMENT.

"Does Verrick know?" Benteley demanded. yes

"Eleanor Stevens?" yes

Benteley's mind flashed anguish. "How do I know this is true? *Prove it!"*

EXAMINE YOUR PELLIG BODY. LOCATE POWER LEADS. TRACE CIRCUIT TO BOMB.

Benteley's fingers flew as he ripped at the synthetic chest and found the main wiring that interlaced the body beneath the layer of artificial skin. He tore loose a whole section of material and probed deep, as Wakeman crouched a few feet away, heart frozen in his chest.

Benteley was wavering. The last clinging mist of loyalty to Verrick was giving way to hatred and disgust. "All right, Wakeman, I'm taking the body back. All the way to Chemie." He leaped into

activity. Realization that Moore was watching made his fingers a blur of motion as he inspected the reactor and jet controls, and then, without a sound, flashed the synthetic robot and ship up into the black sky, towards Earth.

The body had moved almost a quarter of a mile before Herb Moore sent the selector mechanism twitching.

Shatteringly, without warning, Ted Benteley found himself sitting in his chair at A.G. Chemie.

On the miniature screen before him Benteley could see the Pellig body hurtling downwards, racing over the scampering figure of Peter Wakeman and directing its thumb-gun. Wakeman saw what was coming. He stopped running and stood, oddly calm and dignified, as the synthetic body dropped low, spun, and then incinerated him. Moore was in control again.

In an instant Benteley was at the door of the cubicle, reaching for the heavy steel handle.

The door was sealed.

Back at the humming banks of machinery, he tore at relays, and there was a flashing *pop* as the main power cables shorted, sending up acrid fumes and bringing meters to zero. The door swung open, its lock now inoperative. Benteley raced down the hall towards Moore's central lab. On the way he crashed into a lounging Hill guard. Benteley knocked him down, grabbed his gun, turned the corner and plunged into the lab.

There he ended Herb Moore's existence as a living human being.

The effect on the Pellig body was instantaneous. It gave a convulsive leap, whirled and darted grotesquely, a crazed thing swooping aimlessly. All at once, as if Moore were putting some prearranged plan into operation, *random motion ceased.* The body moved in a purposeful circle and in a flash shot off for deep space.

On the screen, the Luna surface receded. It dwindled and became a ball, then a dot, then it was gone.

The lab doors burst open. Verrick and Eleanor Stevens entered quickly. "What did you do?" Verrick demanded hoarsely. "He's gone crazy. He's heading away from..."

He saw the lifeless body of Herb Moore.

"So that's it," he said softly.

Benteley got out of the lab—fast. Verrick didn't try to stop him; he stood staring at Moore's corpse, numbed with shock.

Down the ramp Benteley raced and plunged into the dark street. As a group of Chemie personnel streamed hesitantly out after him he entered the taxi yard and hailed one of the parked urbtrans ships.

"To Bremen!" Benteley gasped. He snapped his seat-straps into place and braced his neck against the take-off impact.

The small high-speed ship shot swiftly into the sky, and A.G. Chemie fell behind.

"Get me to the interplanetary flight base," Benteley ordered.

He wondered how much of his conversation with Wake-man had been picked up by the balance of the Corps. Whether he liked it or not, Luna was the only place that offered a chance of safety. All nine planets were now Hill-operated death traps: Verrick would never rest until he had paid him back. But there was no telling what reception he would get from the Directorate. He might be shot on sight as one of Verrick's agents, he might be regarded as Cartwright's saviour.

Where was the synthetic body going?

The flight field was manned by Hill personnel. Benteley could see intercon liners and transports resting here and there, and great hordes of people. Among the people Hill guards moved about keeping order. Suddenly Benteley changed his mind.

"Don't land here. Isn't there a military field near?"

"The Directorate maintains a small military repair field at Narvik. You want to go there? It's forbidden for non-military ships to set down in that area. I'll have to drop you over the side."

"That sounds like exactly what I want."

Leon Cartwright was fully awake when the Corpsman came running to his quarters. "How far away is he?" Cartwright asked. Even with the injection of sodium pentathol he had slept only a few hours. "Pretty close, I suppose."

"Peter Wakeman is dead," the Corpsman said.

Cartwright got quickly to his feet. "Who killed him?"

"The assassin."

"Then he's here." Cartwright yanked out his hand weapon. "What kind of defence can we put up? How did he find me? What happened to the network at Batavia?"

Rita O'Neill entered the room, white-faced and panting. "The Corps broke down completely. Pellig forced his way to the inner fortress and found you had gone."

Cartwright glanced at her, then back at the Corpsman. "What happened to your people?"

"Our strategy failed," the Corpsman said simply. "Verrick had some kind of deception. I think Wakeman had it analysed before he died."

"Wakeman's dead?" Rita asked in astonishment.

"Pellig got him," Cartwright explained. "That cuts us off from the Corps. We're completely on our own." He turned to the Corpsman. "Have you definitely located the assassin?"

"Our emergency network has collapsed. When Wakeman was killed we lost connection with Pellig."

"If Pellig has got this far," Cartwright said thoughtfully, "we haven't much chance of stopping him."

"Wakeman was handling it," Rita blazed savagely. "You can do much better. His brain was nothing compared with yours." As Cartwright produced a gun she continued: "You're going to defend yourself with that thing? That's all you're going to do?"

At that moment a Corpsman interrupted: "Mr. Cartwright, a ship from Earth has landed. Major Shaeffer was abroad with the remaining Corpsmen. He's coming up the ramp now."

Cartwright fumbled in his coat pocket for cigarettes. "Strange," he said to Rita, "that Wakeman is dead, despite his careful planning."

"I'm not sorry for him. I wish you'd do something instead of just standing there."

"There's not a lot left to do. If one man is determined to kill another there's not much that can be done to stop him."

"I think I liked you better when you were afraid.' Rita said bitterly. "At least I understood that."

"I'll make a concession," Cartwright said. "I'll sit facing the door." He settled gingerly on the edge of a table, his gun in his palm. "What does Pellig look like?" he asked the Corpsman.

"Young. Thin. Blond. No special characteristics."

"What kind of weapon is he using?"

"A thumb-gun. That's a heat beam principle."

"I want to recognize Pellig when I see him," Cartwright explained to Rita. "He may be the next person through that door."

The next person through the door was Major Shaeffer.

"I brought this man with me," Shaeffer said to Cartwright, as he entered the room. "As you'll want to talk to him."

A dark, neatly-dressed man in his early thirties had entered slightly behind Shaeffer.

"This is Ted Benteley," Shaeffer said. "A serf of Reese Verrick's."

Benteley was sharp and tense, more on edge than they had first realized. "Shaeffer is incorrect," he said. "I'm not under oath to Verrick any longer. I've left him."

"You broke your oath?" Cartwright asked.

"He broke his oath to me. I left in a considerable hurry and came here direct from A.G. Chemie; there were complications."

"He killed Herb Moore," Shaeffer amplified.

"Not exactly," Benteley corrected. "I killed his body, his physical self."

He began to explain the situation. When he was half through Cartwright interrupted with a question: "Where's—well, I suppose we should still call it Pellig. When we last heard of him he was only a few miles from here."

"The Pellig body is on its way towards deep space," Benteley said. "Moore isn't interested in you any more; now he's got his own problems. When he realized he was stuck in the synthetic body he left Luna and headed straight out."

"Where to?" Cartwright asked.

"I don't know."

"It doesn't matter," Rita said impatiently. "He's not after you; that's what's important. Perhaps he became insane. Perhaps he's lost control of the body."

"I doubt it. Moore will keep struggling to the end; he's desperate and totally ruthless." Benteley described how Moore had destroyed Peter Wakeman.

"We're aware of that," Cartwright said. "What kind of velocity is the synthetic body capable of?"

"C-plus," Benteley answered. He was puzzled by the question. "Aren't you satisfied Moore is moving away from here?"

Cartwright licked his dry lips. "I know where he's going."

There was a murmur and then Shaeffer said: "Of course!" He rapidly scanned Cartwright's mind. "He has to find some way to stay alive. Benteley gave me a lot of involuntary material on the trip here; I can fit in most of the missing parts. Moore will undoubtedly be able to find Preston with the information he has."

Benteley was astounded. "Preston alive!"

"That explains the prior informational request," Cartwright mused. "Verrick must have tapped the closed-circuit ipvic beam from the ship." His cigarette came to an end; he dropped it, ground it out wrathfully, lit another. "I should have paid more attention when Wakeman brought it up."

"What could you have done?" Shaeffer inquired.

"Our ship is close to Preston's. Moore wouldn't be interested in it, though. He's after the method by which John Preston has kept himself alive; he'll be trying to get hold of the apparatus to adapt it for his own use." Cartwright shook his head irritably. "Is there any way we can set up a screen to follow his movements?"

"I suppose so," Benteley said. "Ipvic arranged a con- stant visual beam from the body back to Chemie. We could cut into it; it's still being relayed."

"I'd like to keep a visual check on the Pellig body." Cartwright slid his gun into a suitcase on the floor. "We're better off now, of course. Thanks, Benteley." He nodded vaguely to Benteley. "Pellig won't be coming here. We don't have to worry about that, any more."

Rita was eyeing Benteley intently. "You didn't break your oath? You don't consider yourself a felon?"

Benteley returned her hard stare. "Verrick broke his oath to me.

He released me by betraying me."

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Well," Cartwright said, "let's have something to eat, and you can explain the rest to us." He moved towards the door, the ghost of a smile on his tired face. "We have time, now. My assassin is a thing of the past."

As they ate, Benteley put his feelings into words. "I killed Moore because I had no choice. In a few seconds he would have turned Pellig over to a technician and returned to his own body at Chemie. Pellig would have gone on and detonated against you; some of Moore's staff are as loyal as that."

"How close would the body have had to be?" Cartwright asked.

"It got to within three miles of you. Two miles closer and Verrick would now be dominating the known system."

"No actual contact was necessary?"

"I had time for only a quick look at the wiring, but a standard proximity mechanism tuned to your brain pattern was wired into the circuit. And then there's the power of the bomb itself. The law specifies no weapon a man can't carry in one hand. The bomb was a regulation H-grenade from the last war."

"The bomb *is."* Cartwright reminded him.

"Everything depended on Pellig?" Rita asked.

"There was a second synthetic body. It's about half complete. Nobody at Chemie expected total disorganisation of the Corps; they got more than they hoped for. But Moore is out of the picture. The second body will never go into operation; only Moore can bring it to its final stages. He kept everybody else down to lower levels—and Verrick knows that."

"What happens when Moore reaches Preston?" Rita asked. "Then Moore will be back in the picture again."

"I didn't know about Preston," Benteley admitted. "I destroyed Moore's body so that he couldn't leave the synthetic. If Preston is going to help him he'll have to work fast. The synthetic won't last long in deep space."

"Why didn't you want him to kill me?" Cartwright inquired.

"I didn't care if he killed you. I wasn't thinking about you."

"That's not quite true," Shaeffer said. "The thought *was* there. When you made your psychological break you automatically switched against Verrick's strategy. You acted as an impeding agent semi-voluntarily."

Benteley wasn't listening. "I was tricked from the beginning," he said. "All of them were mixed up in it; Verrick, Moore, Eleanor Stevens. Wakeman tried to warn me. I came to the Directorate to get away from rottenness. I found myself doing its work; Verrick gave

orders, I followed them."

"You have to have faith in yourself," Rita O'Neill said.

"I stood the rottenness as long as I could, then I rebelled. I think Verrick broke his oath to me... I think I was released. But maybe I'm wrong, and a felon."

"If you are," Shaeffer pointed out, "you can be shot on sight."

"A point came when the whole thing sickened me so much that I couldn't work with it any more, even if it means being hunted down and shot."

"That may happen," Cartwright said. "You say Verrick knew about the bomb?"

"That's right."

Cartwright reflected. "A protector isn't supposed to send a serf to his death. You didn't know Verrick had been deposed when you took your oath?"

"No. But they knew."

Cartwright rubbed his grizzled jaw with the back of his hand. "Well, possibly you have a case. You're an interesting person, Benteley. What are you going to do now? Are you going to take a fealty oath again?"

"I don't think so," Benteley said. "A man shouldn't become another man's serf."

Rita O'Neill spoke up. "You should join my uncle's staff. You should swear allegiance to him."

They were all looking at him. Benteley said nothing for a while. "The Corps takes an occupational oath, doesn't it?" he asked presently.

"That's right," Shaeffer said. "That's the oath Peter Wakeman thought so much of."

"If you're interested," Cartwright said, his shrewd old eyes on Benteley, "I'll swear you in—as Quizmaster. With merely an occupational oath."

Benteley got slowly to his feet and stood waiting as Cartwright rose. With Rita O'Neill and Shaeffer watching silently he recited the positional oath to Quizmaster Cartwright, then abruptly took his seat.

"Now you're part of us officially," Rita O'Neill said, her eyes dark and intense. "You saved my uncle's life. You saved all our lives; the body would have blown this place to bits. You should have killed Verrick while you were at it. He was there, too."

Benteley strode out of the room and into the corridor. A few Directorate officials stood here and there talking softly. Benteley wandered aimlessly past them, his mind in a turmoil. Soon Rita O'Neill appeared at the doorway and stood watching him, her arms tightly folded. "I'm sorry," she said presently. She came up beside him, breathing rapidly, red lips half-parted. "I shouldn't have said that.

You've done enough." She put her fingers on his arm.

Benteley pulled away. "I broke my oath to Verrick; let's face it. But that's all I will do. I killed Moore—he was as soulless as he is bodiless. But I'm not going to touch Reese Verrick."

Rita's eyes blazed. "Don't you know what he would do to you if he caught you?"

"You don't know when to stop. I swore service to your uncle; isn't that enough?" He faced her defiantly.

She hesitated uncertainly.

"You respect my uncle." She broke off, embarrassed. "Don't you respect me?"

Benteley grinned crookedly. "Of course. In fact..."

At the end of the hall Major Shaeffer appeared. He shouted at Benteley: "Benteley, *run*!"

Benteley stood paralysed. Then he jerked away from Rita O'Neill and raced down the corridor to the descent ramp. Corpsmen and Directorate officials scurried everywhere. He reached the ground level and ran desperately.

A clumsy figure in a half-removed protective suit blocked his way. Eleanor Stevens, red hair flaming, face pale, hurried to him. "Get out of here!" she panted. In the heavy, unfamiliar suit she stumbled and nearly fell. "Ted," she wailed, "don't try to fight him—just run! If he gets you———"

Benteley nodded. "He'll kill me."

Reese Verrick had arrived.

Chapter XIII

In an immense emptiness the synthetic body moved. Like a planet it spread through miles of silence and clouds of dark dust, the void that made up this universe. Its face was calm and placid, a vapid mask that showed nothing of the agony inside.

Herb Moore urged the body relentlessly forward. He felt nothing, saw nothing; stars, planets, the cosmos, had ceased to exist for him. He knew only an internal reality, the lash of his own pain. Farther and farther he took the body away from Earth, past the dull inner planets, Mars and its flow of commerce, freighters and transports. Somewhere along the way he instinctively veered the body from the ominously growing bulk of Jupiter. The giant planet with its own intricate system fell slowly behind, and Moore burst out into deep space. He didn't look back or think about the civilization that lay behind him. His race, his world, had dwindled and faded. His own body, the body of Herbert Moore, was dead. The realization made him hurl the synthetic body madly onwards but soon he allowed it to slow up whilst he examined instruments and computed his approximate location.

He was fifty-two astronomical units out. He was in dead space, beyond the known system. And still the synthetic body hurtled outward, away from the planet on which he had died. Back there he was a corpse; here he was a living spark of fury that never ceased moving. As long as he kept moving he was alive.

He checked his radar. A faint mass, billions of miles away, registered and he turned the body towards it. Mechanism gave him the celestial equator and the degree at which he could expect the Disc —if the Society's calculations were correct.

Slowly a speck separated itself from the frozen canopy and began to swell. It was the tenth planet.

For him there was nothing on Flame Disc. He ignored it, turning his attention to his meters and searching the skies for *something else.* Something that should be near by.

Without warning he was struggling in a lethal cloud of jet exhaust, a radio-active trail strung across the void. He plunged through it and out again, hung for a time, then painstakingly began creeping along it. The trail led to one opaque shape, the lumbering ore-carrier, the battered Society ship making its slow way forward, port lights winking, exhausts belching incandescence.

Moore rested; the synthetic's organs were functioning laboriously —the strain of flight was corroding them. He allowed the body a measure of recuperation, and then plunged ruthlessly on. The thing he sought was somewhere close to the ore-carrier. If he searched long

enough he would cross its path. Patiently he maneuvered the synthetic back and forth an infinite number of times, missing no area of the space near by.

And there it was.

He headed for it, half blinded by exhilaration. The ship danced and glowed before him, a strange shape like nothing he had ever seen before. A little way off he halted and, hanging motionless, examined it intently.

John Preston's ship was ball-shaped, a smooth metallic sphere that was falling behind the lumbering ore-carrier. There was no visible propulsion mechanisms. Nothing marred the polished surface; no ports or fins. It drifted quietly through space, a glowing bubble dancing and bobbing among dust clouds.

Moore brought the synthetic close to the featureless globe and wondered how he could enter it. The cold surface twisted faintly below him; the globe was revolving as it moved. Presently Moore dropped the body until its clutching fingers met the polished surface. He clung frantically—but there was nothing to grip. He bounced away and spun dizzily, but the mass of the globe drew him back. He lay sprawled on it, moving as it moved, turning as it revolved.

For a long time he clung there, wondering and puzzled. Then panic seized him *He had to get in;* already the artificial material of the synthetic body was deteriorating. It hadn't been made for deep space; in the intense cold it was becoming brittle. The slightest blow would snap him in half, and with each passing moment more of his fuel was consumed. The body was wearing out and when it ceased functioning the last spark that was Herbert Moore would perish.

The thought was too much. Here, in the dismal reaches beyond the known universe, his mind would flicker and die. His personality, his being, would cease within a matter of hours unless he could bring the synthetic body out of the frozen chill of deep space, back to warmth.

He had to find a way into the globe.

In the end he savagely burned a tunnel through the steel hull. Inch by inch, painfully and exhaustingly, he bored until a flash of air and light burst out from the interior. With clumsy, nervous fingers he clawed his way in, slithering through the still smoking tunnel and dropped with a crash in the midst of humming machinery. Air shrieked past him out to the rent he had made in the hull. Quickly he sealed it and then turned to see where he was.

He was in a single chamber. The globe was a shell, a. hollow sphere of power and equipment, cables and relays and endless dials and meters. For a moment he stood bewildered. Then he located a narrow path that led through the throbbing generators. He pushed

past rows of high-tension leads, suddenly apprehensive; to incinerate the synthetic body after coming this far...

And then he saw him.

For the first time in his life Moore was filled with awe. Here was something beyond anything he had ever known or done. He backed away a few steps, his courage draining. He felt a humbleness and he looked away.

"Welcome," the old man said gently. "Don't be afraid.

I'm only another human being like yourself. I am John Preston."

He was encased in a web of fragile wires, a cage of glittering machinery whose constant whirr vibrated through the sphere. He seemed to stand within a column of some volatile substance.

Moore had never seen flesh so ancient. It was clear that John Preston could live only in the bath of nourishing fluid that encased him; he could not survive outside. What remained of him was as fragile as a withered leaf—just cracked brownish flesh on brittle stalks of bone. Disappointment welled up in Moore; bitter despair choked his throat and brought tears to his eyes. What he had come for, the thing on which his life depended, was a relic, not a man at all.

This creature was John Preston, suspended in a nourishing bath of salt solution; fed and maintained by a vast sphere of intricate machinery...

"I am very old," John Preston mumbled, his voice mechanically amplified by a bank of speakers above him, "and I am almost completely deaf and paralysed." The paper-thin lips twisted in what might have been an apologetic smile. "I can't really see you clearly."

"So you're Preston? It's hard to believe."

The ancient head, supported by a hoop of struts, nodded faintly. The old man seemed to be watching Moore intently with two deep-sunk orbs that glowed like fires within the bulging skull beneath grey, spicier-web hair. It was some while before the blackened teeth moved and words came again.

"It has been a long wait." The eyes gleamed, but Moore realized that there was no sight there. One by one the old man's senses had deteriorated and left him. "Many, many long days alone."

"How long?" Moore asked curiously.

His question hadn't been heard, so he made his own computation. John Preston's death had been reported a century and a half ago. And he had already lived eighty-seven years before that... Preston was already old.

Preston had become a spindly old man before he had left Earth to head out to deep space. He was tottering before he had entered the nourishing bath.

"What is it?" Moore demanded avidly. "This bath, all this

machinery! What's the principle?"

After a moment Preston answered. "I want to tell you about Flame Disc—that's what I consider important."

To hell with Flame Disc, Moore thought savagely. "How long have you been preserved by this equipment?" he demanded.

"You must hear me out," Preston said stubbornly. "I have to tell you about the Disc."

Moore cursed inwardly. He would have to listen, though each minute the life-fluid dripped from the synthetic body. "Can I examine your machinery?" he pressed.

"Yes, but listen to me *now;* I may not live much longer."

Moore grabbed a tool from a wall and bored rapidly into the bank of controls. While he worked, the old man's whisper continued.

"I have to remain here," Preston said. "I don't dare leave. If I returned to Earth I should be destroyed. How much you know of the situation I can only guess. To some, my search for the tenth planet has seemed a lunatic scheme. The search has been long... and it has brought me nothing."

Moore glanced up. "You found Flame Disc, didn't you?"

"I didn't labour for anything of personal value. The Disc isn't my property; I'm only a guardian waiting until the real owners come. It was for them that I worked." His chest rose and fell with exhaustion. Then energy briefly surged through the withered veins. "All my life I've struggled to find a way for them so that they could keep on moving. If they stop, it's the end of the race. They can't stagnate and die. Death or migration... .

Moore was intent only on the circuits spread out before him. His eyes feverish, his fingers flying, he burrowed into the humming mechanism.

* * *

"You had better disappear," Leon Cartwright said to Benteley. "I'll talk to Verrick."

"He might as well stay here," Shaeffer said to Cartwright, "he can't leave the place and Verrick knows he's here."

"Verrick can just walk in?" Benteley said helplessly.

"Of course," Cartwright said.

"Do you mind being present?" Shaeffer asked Benteley. "It may be —difficult."

"I'll stay," Benteley replied.

Verrick and his small group pushed slowly through the door. They removed their suits and glanced cautiously around.

Cartwright greeted Verrick and the two of them shook hands. "A cup of coffee?"

"Thanks," Verrick answered. "You know that Pellig has left?"

Cartwright nodded. "He's heading for John Preston's ship."

The others followed them as they entered the dining-room. Benteley seated himself beside Rita O'Neill at the far end of a table; Verrick saw him but gave merely a momentary flicker of recognition. Shaeffer, the other Corpsmen and Directorate officials, took seats in the background.

"I suppose he'll find it," Verrick murmured. "When I left Chemie he was already thirty-nine astronomical units out; I checked with the ipvic monitor." He accepted black coffee and sipped it with relief. "A devil of a lot has happened today."

"What would Moore do if he got hold of Preston's material?" Cartwright asked. "You know him better than I do."

"It's hard to say. Moore was always a lone wolf. I provided him with materials and he worked on his own on his projects. He's brilliant. He engineered the whole Pellig project."

Eleanor Stevens had come into the room. She stood nervous and uncertain, her thin hands clasped tightly together. After a moment of indecision she slipped into a seat in a recess and watched wide-eyed, a demure and terrified shape half lost in shadow.

"I wondered where you'd gone," Verrick called to her. "You raced me by a—" he examined his watch—"only a few minutes."

"Will Moore return to you if he gets what he wants?" Cartwright asked. "His oath... ?"

"He never worried about that sort of thing." Verrick's glance strayed. "Oaths don't seem as important as they once did."

Benteley said nothing. Under his fingers his gun was cold and moist with perspiration. His coffee cooled beside him, untouched. Rita O'Neill smoked convulsively, stubbed her cigarette out, lit another and then stubbed that.

"Are you going to call a second Challenge Convention?" Cartwright asked Verrick.

Verrick made an intricate pyramid with his massive hands, studied it, then dissolved it back into individual fingers. He gazed absently round the room.

"Why did you come here?" Rita O'Neill's voice cracked out.

Verrick's shaggy eyebrows pulled together in a frown as he turned to Cartwright for an explanation. "My niece," Cartwright said. He introduced them; Rita glared down at her coffee cup and said nothing. Verrick soon forgot her and went back to pyramiding his fingers.

"Of course," he said finally. "I don't know what Benteley has told you. I suppose you understand my set-up, by now."

"What Benteley didn't tell me orally, Shaeffer scanned," Cartwright answered.

"Then you know all I have to say by way of explanation. I don't intend to say anything about Herb Moore." He produced a gun which he propped up right against a milk jug. "I can't very well kill Benteley here..."

Shaeffer and Cartwright exchanged glances.

"We must clear up one thing," Cartwright said. "Benteley is now under oath to me, as Quizmaster."

Verrick snapped: "He broke his oath to me; that ends his freedom of choice."

Cartwright rejoined: "I don't consider that he broke his oath to you."

"You betrayed him," Shaeffer added.

Verrick grunted, retrieved his gun, and replaced it in his pocket. "We'll have to get advice on this," he murmured. "Let's try to get Judge Waring up here."

Judge Felix Waring, the highest ranking jurist in the system, was a grouchy, white-bearded gnome in a moth-eaten black suit and old-fashioned hat.

"I know who you are," he muttered, glancing at Cartwright. "And you, too." He nodded at Verrick. "That Pellig of yours was a fizzle, wasn't he?" He cackled gleefully. "I never liked the looks of him—didn't have a muscle in him."

The ship that had brought Judge Waring had disgorged newsmachines, Hill officials, Directorate bureaucrats, and finally Sam Oster. Ipvic technicians had come in their own ship; signalmen with reels of communication wiring wandered everywhere, stringing up television equipment. Towards the middle of the day the place became a hive of noisy, determined activity. Motion was everywhere, figures coming and going... Benteley stood in a corner, watching gloomily.

"It's nice, here," Rita O'Neill said, settling herself for a doze.

Benteley nodded, then muttered: "So Judge Waring is going to make his decision amid all this din?"

In another corner Leon Cartwright was talking with a barrel-chested, grim-faced man, Sam Oster was congratulating him on his successful bout with his first assassin.

Benteley gazed at them until they separated. Finally he turned—and found himself facing Eleanor Stevens.

"Who is she?" Eleanor asked in a clipped voice.

"Cartwright's niece," he answered, following her gaze.

She shrugged and started away suddenly; after a moment

Benteley followed. "They're about to start; they're going to let that stupid old goat decide," she went on.

"I know," Benteley said listlessly.

"He hardly knows what's going on. Verrick pulled the wool over his eyes at the Convention; he'll do it again. Has there been any news about Moore?"

"An Ipvic screen has been set up, for Cartwright's use. Verrick doesn't care; he didn't interfere."

"What does it show?"

"I don't know. I haven't bothered to look." Benteley came to a halt. Through a half-open door he had caught a glimpse of a table and chairs, ash-trays, recording instruments. "Is that——"

"That's the room they set up." Suddenly Eleanor gave a cry of terror. "Please get me out of here!"

Reese Verrick had moved past the door of the room.

"He knows—about us," Eleanor said as they pushed among the people. "I came to warn you——"

"Too bad!" Benteley said vaguely.

"Don't you care?"

"There's nothing I can do to Reese Verrick."

"You can kill him!" Her voice was shrill with hysteria. "Before he kills both of us!"

"No," Benteley said, "I'm not going to kill Reese Verrick. I'll wait and see what happens. In any case, I'm finished with that."

"And—with me?"

"You knew about the bomb."

Eleanor shuddered. "What could I do?" She hurried after him, frantic with apprehension. "Ted, I couldn't stop it, could I?"

"You knew that night when we were together. When you talked me into it."

"Yes!" Eleanor slid defiantly in front of him, blocking his way. "That's right." Her green eyes glittered wildly. "I knew. But I meant everything I said to you."

Benteley turned away, disgusted.

"Listen to me." She caught imploringly at his arm.

"Reese knew, too. Everybody knew. It couldn't be helped—somebody had to be in the Pellig body."

Benteley stepped back as a grumbling white-bearded little old man pushed angrily past him towards the antechamber. He disappeared inside the room and dropped his heavy book on the table with a thump. He blew his nose, moved critically about examining the chairs, and finally took a seat at the head of the table. Reese Verrick, standing at the window, exchanged a few words with him. A moment later Leon Cartwright followed after Judge Waring.

Benteley's heart resumed beating, slowly and reluctantly. The session was about to begin.

Chapter XIV

There were five people in the room.

Judge Waring sat at one end of the table. Leon Cartwright faced the massive figure of Reese Verrick, separated by two heaped ash-trays and a pitcher of ice water. Benteley and Major Shaeffer sat opposite each other at the low end of the table. The final chair was empty. Oster, the ipvic technicians, the Directorate officials, the Hill staff officers, had been barred.

Judge Waring glared suspiciously from Verrick to Cartwright and back to Verrick. "Is the recording business going?"

A recording technician crept agilely along the table and took up a position in front of Reese Verrick. "Thanks," Verrick said, as he collected his papers and prepared to begin.

"Is this the fellow?" Waring asked, indicating Benteley.

"He's the one I came for," Verrick said, with a brief glance at Benteley. "But he's not the only one. They're all breaking their oaths and betraying me." His voice trailed off, but he roused himself and quietly delivered his statement. "Benteley was dropped by Oiseau-Lyre. He came to me at Batavia looking for an eight-eight position; that's his class. Things were bad for me at that time but I took him on, in spite of my own uncertainty. I took him into my household, gave him a flat at A.G. Chemie."

Shaeffer shot a quick glance at Cartwright; he was ahead of Verrick's spoken words.

"I put him on my bio-chemist research staff. Fed him. Took care of him." Verrick raised his voice a trifle. "He was given a responsible position in my biggest project, at his own insistence. He stated that he wanted to get in on policy-level. I gave him what he asked. At the crucial moment he betrayed me. He killed his immediate superior, dropped his work, and fled. Too cowardly to go on, he broke his oath. The project collapsed because of him. He came here aboard a Directorate ship and tried to swear allegiance to the Quizmaster."

Verrick was silent. He had finished.

Benteley heard the words with a kind of dull surprise. Was that what had happened? Waring was looking at him curiously, waiting for him to speak. Benteley shrugged; he had nothing to say.

Cartwright spoke up. "What was Benteley's job in this project?"

Verrick hesitated. "He was doing substantially the same work as the other class eight-eight people."

"Was there *any* difference?"

Verrick was silent a moment. "Not that I can recall."

"That's a lie," Shaeffer said to Judge Waring. "He knows of a

difference."

Verrick nodded reluctantly. "There was one difference," he admitted. "Benteley asked for and got the leading position. He would have taken the project to its final stage. He was trusted completely."

"What was that stage?" Judge Waring asked.

"Benteley's death," Cartwright answered.

Verrick didn't contradict him. He pretended to examine his papers until finally Judge Waring asked: "Is that true?"

Verrick nodded.

"Did Benteley know?" Judge Waring pressed.

"Not at first. It wasn't possible to make the information available to him immediately; he had just joined the staff. He betrayed me when he found out." Verrick gripped his papers convulsively. "He destroyed the project. They all deserted and let me down."

"Who else betrayed you?" Shaeffer asked curiously.

"Eleanor Stevens. Herb Moore."

"Oh," Shaeffer said. "I thought Moore was the man Benteley killed."

Verrick nodded. "Moore was his immediate superior and in charge of the project."

"If Benteley killed Moore, and Moore had betrayed you..." Shaeffer turned to Judge Waring. "It sounds as if Benteley acted as a loyal serf."

Verrick snorted. "Moore betrayed me afterwards. After Benteley ——" He broke off.

"Go on," Shaeffer said.

"After Benteley killed him," Verrick said woodenly.

"What's that?" Judge Waring asked testily.

"Tell him what the project was," Shaeffer suggested mildly. "Then he'll understand."

Verrick studied the table in front of him. "I have nothing more to say." He got slowly to his feet. "I withdraw the material relating to Moore's death. That isn't relevant."

"What do you charge?" Cartwright asked.

"Benteley left the job I had assigned to him, the job he took on when he swore loyalty to me."

"It was either that or death," Cartwright pointed out.

"He should have stayed, it was his job."

Cartwright rose. "I have nothing else to say," he said to Judge Waring. "I accepted Benteley because I considered him freed from his prior oath to Verrick. I considered the oath broken by Verrick. A protector isn't supposed to send a serf to involuntary death."

Judge Waring's beard bobbed up and down. "A protector can destroy his serf on an involuntary basis only if the serf has broken his

oath. In breaking his oath the serf forfeits his rights but remains his protector's property." He gathered up his law books. "The case here rests on one point: if the protector in question broke his side of the oath first, the serf in question was legally within his rights to drop his work and leave. But if the protector did not break his side of the oath prior to the serf's departure, then the serf is a felon liable to the death penalty."

Cartwright moved towards the door. Verrick followed, hands deep in his pockets. "That's it, then," Cartwright said. "We'll wait for your decision."

Benteley was with Rita O'Neill when the decision came, hours later. Shaeffer brought the news. "I've been scanning Judge Waring," he said. "He's made up his mind."

Benteley and Rita were sitting in a bar, two vague shapes in the dim colour-twisting shadows that enveloped their table. A single aluminium candle sputtered between them. Directorate officials were sitting about, murmuring, gazing vacantly ahead, sipping drinks. "Well?" Benteley said. "What is it?"

"It's in your favour," Shaeffer said. "He'll announce it in a few minutes."

"Then Verrick has no claim over me," Benteley said wonderingly.

Shaeffer moved away. "Congratulations."

Rita put her hand on Benteley's. "We should celebrate," she said.

"Yes, I'm where I wanted to be." Benteley sipped his drink. "Working for the Directorate. Sworn to the Quizmaster. This is what I set out for."

Rita tore apart a match folder and fed the fragments to the metallic candle. "You're not satisfied, are you?"

"I'm as far from satisfaction as it's humanly possible to be."

"Why?" she asked softly.

"I haven't really done anything. I thought it was the Hills, but Wakeman was right. It isn't the Hills—it's the whole society. The stench is everywhere. Getting away from the Hill system doesn't help me or anybody else." He angrily pushed his glass away. "I could simply hold my nose and pretend it isn't there. But that isn't enough. Something has to be done. The whole thing has to be pulled down. It's rotten, corrupt... ready to fall on its face. But something has to be built in its place. Tearing down isn't enough. I've got to help build up the new. I'd like to do something that will make it different for other people. I *have* to do something to alter things."

"Maybe you will."

"How? Where'll the chance come from? I'm still a serf. Tied down. Under oath."

"You're young. We both are. We've got years ahead of us in which

to plan things." Rita lifted her glass.

Benteley smiled. "I'll drink to that." He raised his own glass and touched hers. "But not too much." His smile ebbed. "Verrick is still hanging around. I'll wait until he leaves before I do my drinking."

Rita stopped feeding bits of paper to the white-hot candle flame. "What would happen if he killed you?"

"They'd shoot him."

"What would happen if he killed my uncle?"

"They'd take away his power-card. He'd never be Quizmaster."

"He won't be Quizmaster, anyhow," Rita said quietly.

Benteley roused himself. "What are you thinking?"

"He won't go back empty-handed. He can't stop at this point." She glanced up at him, dark-eyed and serious. "It's not over, Ted. He has to kill somebody."

At that moment a shadow touched the table. He glanced up, one hand in his pocket, against his gun.

"Hello!" Eleanor Stevens said. "Mind if I join you?"

She sat down facing them, hands folded in front of her, a fixed smile on her lips. Her green eyes flashed brightly at Benteley, then at Rita. In the half-shadows her hair glowed a rust red, soft and heavy against her bare neck and shoulders.

"Who are you?" Rita asked.

Green eyes dancing, Eleanor leaned forward to light her cigarette from the candle. "Just a name. Not really a person any more. Isn't that right, Ted?"

"You better get out of here," Benteley said. "I don't think Verrick wants you with us."

"I haven't seen Verrick since I got here, except at a distance. Maybe I'll leave him. Everybody else seems to be doing it."

"Be careful," Benteley said.

"About what?" Eleanor blew a cloud of smoke. "I couldn't help hearing what you were saying. You're right." Her eyes were fixed intently on Rita; she spoke rapidly in a sharp, brittle voice. "Verrick wants you Ted, but he'll make do with Cartwright if he can't get you. He's down in his quarters trying to make up his mind. He used to have Moore handy to arrange things in a neat mathematical equation. Assign an arbitrary value of plus 50 for killing Benteley. But minus 100 for being shot in retribution. Assign an arbitrary value of plus 40 for killing Cartwright. But a minus 50 for losing his power-card. Both way he loses."

Benteley agreed warily. "He loses both ways."

"Here's another," Eleanor said brightly. "I thought this one up myself." She nodded merrily to Rita. "I mean, you thought it up. But I made up the equation. Assign an arbitrary value of plus 40 for killing

Cartwright. And then try this. *Assign a minus* 100 *by Cartwright for being killed.* That takes care of that part; that's for Reese. Then there's my own, but that's not much."

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Rita said indifferently.

"I do!" Benteley said. *"Look out*!*"*

Eleanor had already moved. On her feet like a cat, she grabbed up the aluminium candle and ground the tube of bubbling flame into Rita's face.

Benteley slammed the candle away. With a tinny grumble it rolled from the table and clanked on the floor. Soundlessly Eleanor slipped round the table to Rita O'Neill, who sat pawing helplessly at her eyes. Her black hair and skin were smoking and charred; the acrid odour of seared flesh filled the air. Eleanor tore the woman's hand away. Something glittered between the girl's fingers, a scarf-pin that came swiftly up at Rita's eyes. Benteley hurled himself at the girl; she clung to him desperately, clawing and stabbing blindly until he shook her loose. Green eyes wild and glazed, she spun away and vanished into the black shadows.

Benteley turned quickly to Rita O'Neill. "I'm all right," Rita said between clenched teeth. "The candle went out and she didn't get me with the pin. Better try to catch her."

People on all sides were leaping up and hurrying over. Eleanor had already disappeared.

"Go on," Rita cried, her hands over her face, elbows resting against the table. "You know where she's going. You know what he'll do to her."

Benteley ran into the corridor and towards the descent lift. A moment later he emerged on the ground level. At the far end of the corridor he saw a flash of green and red. He raced forward, turned a corner — and stopped dead.

Eleanor Stevens stood facing Reese Verrick. "Listen to me," she was entreating. "It's the only way." Her voice rose in shrill panic. "Reese, for mercy's sake believe me. Take me back! I'm sorry. I left you but I won't do it again. I'm bringing you this, aren't I?"

Verrick saw Benteley. He smiled slightly as he reached out to seize Eleanor's wrist with his iron-hard fingers. "We're back together. All three of us."

"You've got it wrong," Benteley said to him. "She didn't mean to betray you. She's loyal."

"I don't think so," Verrick said. "She's no good."

"Then let her go."

Verrick considered. "No," he said finally.

"Reese!" the girl wailed. "I told you what they said! I told you how

you can do it—now! I made it possible, so take me back, please take me back!"

"I can do it. But I had already worked it out."

Benteley stepped in fast, but not fast enough.

"Ted!" Eleanor screamed. "Help me!"

Verrick swept her up and lugged her in three giant strides to a precipitous drop beyond which was dead bleakness. Verrick lifted the screaming, struggling girl high and with one quick movement threw her sprawling into eternity.

She stumbled and fell into rubble and rock, arms flailing, face distorted, eyes bulging. For one pleading instant she looked towards Benteley.

Numbed, Benteley plucked out his gun. Shaeffer knocked it from his hand. "No good—she's dead!"

Benteley nodded. "Yes, I know and Verrick is going to get away with it."

He moved away to stumble on to the ascent ramp.

Footsteps and heavy breathing sounded behind him and the ramp shuddered under a great weight. Verrick had followed.

"Wait a minute, Benteley," he said. "I'll come along with you. I have a business transaction I think Cartwright will be interested in."

Verrick waited until Judge Waring, muttering and fumbling with his chair, had seated himself. Opposite him Cartwright sat straight and white-faced.

"How's your niece?" Verrick asked.

"She'll be all right," Cartwright said, "thanks to Benteley."

"Yes," Verrick agreed. "I always thought Benteley could act when necessary. It was her face Eleanor struck for?"

"Surgeons can fix her up. It didn't get to her eyes; mostly her skin and hair."

Benteley couldn't stop looking at Reese Verrick, calm and collected. His breathing had returned to normal; his face had a mottled look but his hands had stopped trembling.

"What do you want?" Cartwright asked him. He turned to Judge Waring. "I don't know what this is about."

"Neither do I," Judge Waring agreed crossly. "What is this, Reese? What have you got on your mind?"

Verrick explained. "I have a proposal to offer Cartwright. I want you to hear it out and see that it's legal." He placed his gun on the table in front of him. "We've come to a dead end. You can't kill me, Leon; that would be murder. The death of Eleanor will be ignored—she was in an important social category."

Cartwright did not take his eyes from Verrick.

"I came here to kill Benteley, but I can't. Stalemate. Stalemate on

all sides; you can't kill me, I can't kill Benteley, and I can't kill you."

Shaeffer entered the room. He glanced at Judge Waring and took a seat. "Leon," he said to Cartwright, "this is a bluff on his part. The girl took him the idea before he killed her. He wants to scare you ———"

"I know," Cartwright said. "He's going to suggest an arrangement. What's your proposition, Reese?"

Verrick dug into his pocket and got out his power-card. "A swap," he said. "Your card for mine."

"That would make you Quizmaster," Cartwright observed.

"You'll come out of this with your life, I'll come out with the Quizmastership."

"Then you'll have Benteley," Cartwright said.

"That's right," Verrick answered.

Cartwright turned to Shaeffer. "Will he kill me if I refuse?"

Shaeffer was silent for a long time. "Yes," he said at last, "he won't leave here without killing you or getting Benteley back. If you don't fit in he'll kill you and surrender his card. If you do, he'll have Benteley again. Either way he gets one of you. He knows he can't get both. He'd prefer to have Benteley; he has got to have him under control again."

Cartwright searched his pockets until he found his package of power-cards. He sorted through them slowly. "Is this legal?" he asked Judge Waring.

"You can exchange," Waring said gruffly.

Benteley rose. "Cartwright, are you really——"

"Sit down!" Waring snapped. "You have no say in this."

Cartwright found the correct card, checked it with his other papers, then laid it on the table. "There's mine."

"You're willing to exchange?" Verrick asked. "You understand what it means? You're legally giving up your position. With your card goes everything."

"I understand."

Verrick turned round and faced Benteley. The two of them gazed at each other a moment, neither speaking. Then Verrick grunted: "It's a deal."

Benteley said thickly: "Cartwright, you know what he'll do to me, don't you?"

Cartwright ignored him; he was returning the little package of power-cards to his coat pocket. "Go ahead," he said mildly to Verrick. "Let's finish so that I can go to Rita."

Verrick reached forward and picked up Cartwright's power-card. "Now I'm Quizmaster."

Cartwright's hand came out of his pocket. With his small, antiquated gun he shot Reese Verrick directly in the heart. Still

clutching the power-card, Verrick slid forward and lay with his face against the table, eyes and mouth open.

"Is it legal?" Cartwright asked the Judge.

"Absolutely." Waring nodded solemnly. "Of course you lose that packet of cards you hold."

Cartwright tossed them to the Judge. "I'm an old man and I'm tired."

Benteley sagged. "He's dead. It's over."

Cartwright got to his feet. "Now we can go downstairs and see how Rita is."

Chapter XV

Rita o'neill was on her feet when the two of them entered the infirmary. "I'm all right," she said huskily. "What happened?"

"Verrick's dead," Benteley said.

"Yes, we're all finished," Cartwright added. He went up to his niece and kissed the bandage that covered her face. "You've lost some of your hair."

"It'll grow again," Rita said as she sat down shakily. "You killed him and came out with your own life?"

"I came out with everything but my power-card," Cartwright said. He explained what had happened. "Now there's no Quizmaster. There will have to be a fresh selection."

"It's hard to believe," Rita said. "It seems as if there's always been a Reese Verrick."

Cartwright searched his pockets and brought out a notebook. He made a tick and then closed the book. "Everything but Herb Moore. We still have that to worry about. The ship hasn't yet landed, and the Pellig body is somewhere within a few hundred thousand miles of Flame Disc." He hesitated, then continued: "As a matter of fact, the ipvic monitor says Moore reached Preston's ship and entered it."

There was an uneasy silence.

"Could he destroy our ship?" Rita asked.

"Easily," Benteley said, "and a good part of the Disc at the same time."

"Maybe John Preston will do something to him," Rita suggested hopefully, but there was no conviction in her voice.

"Much depends on the next Quizmaster," Benteley pointed out. "Some kind of a work-crew should go out to round up Moore. The body will be deteriorating; we might be able to destroy him."

"Not after he reaches Preston," Cartwright said gloomily.

"I think we should consult the next Quizmaster," Benteley persisted. "Moore will be a menace to the system. You think the next Quizmaster would agree?"

"I think so," Cartwright said, "since you're the next Quizmaster. That is, assuming you've still got the power-card I gave you."

Benteley had the card; he got it out and examined it. "You expect me to believe this?"

"No, not for another twenty-four hours."

Benteley turned the card over and again studied it. The power-card looked like any other; the same shape, colour and texture. "You've been carrying this about?"

"I've been carrying a whole packet of them," Cartwright answered.

"Give me time to adjust my thoughts." Benteley managed to get the power-card in his pocket. "Is this all really on the level? Or have you worked out a system of prediction?"

"No," Cartwright answered. "I can't predict selection results any better than the next person."

"But you had this card! You know what's coming up!"

"What I did," Cartwright admitted, "was tamper with the selection machinery. During my lifetime I've had access to Geneva a thousand times. I set up the numbers of the power-cards I had been able to acquire, in such a way that they constitute the next nine selections."

"Was that ethical?" Benteley demurred.

"I played the game for years," Cartwright said. "Then I began to realize that the rules were all against me. Who wants to play that kind of game?"

Benteley agreed: "No, there's no point in playing a rigged game. But what's the answer?"

"I joined the Preston Society."

"Why?"

"Because Preston saw through the rules, too. He wanted what I wanted, a game in which everybody stood a chance. Not that I expect everybody to carry off the same size pot at the end of the game. But I think everybody ought to have a chance of winning something."

"What are you going to do now?" Benteley asked. "You can't hold power again."

"I'm going to spend the rest of my days sunning myself, sleeping, contemplating."

Rita spoke. "Twenty-four hours, Ted, then you're Quizmaster. You're where my uncle was, a few days ago. You'll be waiting for them to come and notify you."

"Shaeffer knows," Cartwright said. "He and I worked it out before I gave you the card."

"Then the Corps will respect the arrangement?"

"The Corps will respect *you"* Cartwright answered quietly. "It's going to be a big job. Things are happening; stars are opening up like roses; the Disc is out there... a half way point. The whole system will be changing."

"You think you can handle it?" Rita asked Benteley.

Benteley replied thoughtfully: "I wanted to get where I could make changes; here I am." Suddenly he laughed. "I'm probably the first person who was ever under oath to himself. I'm both protector and serf at the same time. I have the power of life and death over myself."

"It sounds like a good kind of oath, to me," Cartwright said. "You take the full responsibility for protection and for carrying out the work. You have nobody to answer to but your own conscience."

Major Shaeffer hurried into the room. "The ipvic monitor's in with a final report on Moore."

Cartwright responded: *"Final?"*

"The ipvic people followed the synthetic body to the point when it entered Preston's ship; you knew that. The body began investigating the machinery that maintains Preston. At that point the image cut off."

"Why?"

"According to the repair technicians, the synthetic body detonated itself. Moore, the ship, John Preston and his machinery, were blown to ash. A direct visual image has already been picked up by innerplan astronomers."

"Did some kind of electrical influence set of the bomb?" Benteley asked.

"The ipvic image showed Moore deliberately opening the synthetic's chest and shorting the bomb-leads." Shaeffer shrugged. "I think we'd better send out a crew to investigate."

Cartwright got out his notebook. With a look of bewilderment on his seamed, aged face he ticked off the last item and restored the book in his pocket. "Well, that takes care of that." He examined his heavy pocket watch. "The ship should be landing soon. If nothing has gone wrong, Groves will be setting down on Flame Disc at any moment."

The Disc was *big.* Brake-jets screamed shrilly against the rising tug of gravity. Bits of metal paint flaked down around Groves; an indicator smashed; somewhere within the hull a feed-line snapped.

"We're about to collapse," Konklin grated.

Groves switched off the overhead light. The control bubble was plunged into darkness.

"What the hell... ?" Konklin began. And then he saw it.

From the viewscreen a soft light radiated, a pale, cold fire that glittered in a moist sheen over the figures of Groves and Konklin and the control. No stars, no black emptiness of space, were visible: the immense face of the planet had silently expanded until it filled everything. Flame Disc lay directly below. The long flight was over.

"It's eerie," Konklin muttered.

"That's what Preston saw."

"What is it?"

"Probably radioactive minerals."

"Where is Preston? I thought his ship was going to guide us all the way."

Groves hesitated, then answered reluctantly. "My meters picked up a thermonuclear explosion about three hours ago. Distance from us, perhaps ten thousand miles. Since the explosion Preston's ship hasn't registered on my gravity indicators. Of course, with the Disc so close a tiny mass like that might not——"

Jereti came hurrying into the control bubble. He saw the screen and halted. "So that's it!"

"That's our new home," Konklin said.

"What makes that funny light? It's like a seance in here."

Konklin left the bubble. The green glow seemed to follow him as he descended a ramp and came out on the main level. At the door of his cabin he halted and stood for a moment listening.

Down in the cargo hold pots and pans, bedding, food, clothing, were being gathered up. A murmur of excited, subdued voices came up over the din of the brake-jets. Gardner was starting to issue pressure suits and helmets.

Konklin pushed open the cabin door and entered.

Mary looked up. "Are we there?"

"Not quite. All ready to step out onto our new world?"

Mary indicated their heap of possessions. "I'm packing."

Konklin laughed. "You and everybody else. Put that stuff back; we're going to live here until we get the subsurface domes set up."

Abashed, Mary began carrying things back to drawers and lockers. "Aren't we going to set up some sort of colony?"

Konklin slapped the bulkhead above his shoulder. "This is it."

Mary lingered with an armload of clothes. "Bill, it'll be hard at first but later it won't be so bad. We'll be living mostly underground, the way they do on Uranus and Neptune. That's pretty nice, isn't it?"

"We'll manage." Konklin gently took the clothes from her. "Let's get down to the cargo hold and find ourselves pressure suits."

Janet Sibley greeted them, nervous and fluttering with excitement. "I can't get into mine," she gasped. "It's too small!"

Konklin helped her to zip the heavy material. "Remem- ber, when you're outside be careful not to trip. These are old type suits. You can puncture them on sharp rocks and be dead in a second."

"Who will land first?" Mary asked, as she slowly zipped up her bulky suit. "Captain Groves?"

"Whoever's closest to the hatch."

Jereti came into the hold and grabbed a suit. "Maybe I'll be the first human to set foot on Flame Disc."

They were still fastening their suits and talking together in small groups when the landing sirens shrieked. "Grab hold!" Konklin shouted above the din. "Hang on to something and get your suits going!"

The ship struck with a crash that tossed them about like dry leaves. Supplies and possessions pitched everywhere as the hull jerked violently. The brake-jets moaned and fought to slow the rocking ship as it ploughed into the ice-hard surface of the planet. Lights flickered and faded, and in the blackness the thunder of the jets and ear-splitting squeal of metal against rock deafened the scattered

passengers into paralysis.

Konklin was thrown against a heap of bedding. In the gloom he fought his way about until his fingers closed upon a hull support. "Mary!" he shouted. "Where are you?"

"I'm here," she answered faintly. "I think my helmet's cracked; it's leaking air."

Konklin caught hold of her. "You're all right." The ship was still moving, an inferno of sound and protesting metal that gradually slowed to a reluctant halt. The lights flickered, came on for a moment, then blinked out. Somewhere moisture dripped slowly and steadily. A fire crackled among heaps of supplies that had tumbled from a locker.

"Get that fire out," Gardner ordered.

With an extinguisher Jereti made his way unsteadily into the corridor. "I guess we're there," he said shakily, as he covered the fire.

Somebody switched on a torch. "The hull must have stood up," Konklin said. "I can't detect any important leaks."

"Let's get out," Mary said intensely. "Let's see it."

Groves was already at the hatch. He stood waiting stonily until everybody had assembled and then he began forward, wide-eyed, silent. The others crowded on the ramp unsealing the heavy doors.

The hatch slid back. Air whooshed out and Groves moved after him; for a moment they stood awed and hesitant. Then they descended.

Half-way down Mary stumbled and Jereti halted to catch hold of her. It was one of the Japanese optical workers who reached the surface first. He slid agilely over the side and dropped to the hard-frozen rock, face excited and eager within his helmet. He grinned up at the others and waved them on.

Mary held back. "Look!" she cried. "Look at it glowing!"

The planet was a plain of green light; wherever they looked there was that colour. In the dim green phosphorescence the men and women were strange shapes, in garments of metal and plastic, as they stepped awkwardly down.

"It's been here all this time," Jereti said wonderingly. He kicked at the frozen rock. "We're the first to set foot here."

"Maybe not," Groves said. "As we landed I saw something." He undipped his heavy-duty shoulder weapon. "Preston thought the Disc might be a stray from another system."

* * *

It was a building. A structure of some kind, resting on the smooth surface ahead; a sphere of some dull metal, without features or

ornaments. Frozen crystals drifted and blew round them as they apprehensively approached the sphere.

"How do we get into it?" Konklin wondered.

Groves lifted his weapon. "I don't see any other way." He squeezed the trigger and moved the muzzle in a slow circle. "This thing may be man-made."

Through the sizzling rent, Konklin and Groves crawled, a dull throbbing reaching their ears as they climbed down to the floor of the globe. They were in a single chamber of whirring machinery. Air shrieked past them as they stood peering about them. Together they managed to get a patch over the leak their weapon had cut. Then they turned to examine the humming bank of mechanism and wiring.

"Welcome," a dry voice said mildly.

They spun quickly, the weapon high.

"Don't be afraid," the voice continued. "I'm only another human being like yourselves. I am John Preston."

Konklin's teeth began to chatter. "You said his ship was destroyed. Look at him; he must be a million years old." He steadied his nerves and went on: "This is your ship——"

"We represent the Preston Society," Groves said awkwardly. "We're following your work. Are you——"

"Something's wrong!" Konklin snapped fearfully. "Something's the matter with him!"

Konklin moved towards the banks of machinery. "This isn't a ship. It's similar to one but it isn't one. I think———"

"I want to tell you about Flame Disc," John Preston interrupted.

Konklin was feverishly examining the smooth inner surface of the sphere. "This has no drive jets! It can't go anywhere!" He leaped away from the machinery. "Groves, this is a buoy!"

"You must hear me," Preston was saying.

Konklin moved away, towards the rent they had cut. "It's not alive. That isn't a nourishing bath. That's some kind of volatile substance on which a vid image is being projected. Vid and aud tapes synchronized to form a replica. He's been dead a hundred and fifty years."

There was silence, except for the whispering voice. Konklin tore away the patch and scrambled out of the sphere. "Come on!" he signalled to the others. "Come in!"

"We got most of that on our phones," Jereti said, as he struggled into the sphere. "What was it all about?"

He saw the replica of John Preston and his voice stopped.

The others scrambled in after him, excited and breathless.

One by one they came to a halt as they saw the old man, and heard the faint words whispering through the thinning air of the

sphere.

"Seal it up," Groves ordered, when the last of the Japanese optical workers was in.

"Is it——" Mary began doubtfully. "But why's he talking like that? Just sort of—reciting."

Konklin put his stiff pressure-glove on the girl's shoulder. "It's only an image. He left hundreds of them maybe thousands, scattered through space to attract ships and lead them to the Disc."

"Then he's dead!"

"He died a long time ago," Konklin said. "You can tell by looking at him that he died a very old man, probably a few years after he found the Disc. He knew ships would one day be coming in this direction. He wanted to bring one here, to his world."

"I guess he didn't know there would be a Society," Mary said sadly. "He didn't realize anybody would actually be *looking* for the Disc."

"No," Konklin agreed. "But he knew there would be ships heading out this way."

"It's sort of—disappointing."

"No," Groves corrected. "Don't feel bad about it. It's only the physical part of John Preston that's dead."

"Listen," Konklin said softly.

They all became silent.

The old man gazed at the group of people, not seeing them, not hearing them, not aware of their presence, and he seemed to speak to listeners far away. "The highest goal of man is to grow and advance, to find new things, to expand, to push aside routine and repetition, to break out of mindless monotony, and thrust forward."

THE END